
the
Duke's
Wayward Ward
CLAUDIA STONE

Contents

Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
About the Author
Chapter One

The Duke's Wayward Ward

Claudia Stone

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For Peter, with thanks for being my marketing guru.

About the Author

About the Author

Claudia Stone was born in South Africa but moved to Plymouth as a young girl. Having trained as an actress at RADA, she moved to New York to pursue her dream of acting on Broadway in 1988. She never did see her name in lights, but she did meet a wonderful Irishman called Conal who whisked her away to the wilds of Kerry, where she has lived ever since.

Claudia and Conal have three children, a dairy farm and a rescue lab called Buddy. When she has any time left over, Claudia enjoys reading Regency as well as writing it.

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Chapter One

Peter William Brazil, Sixth Duke of Liscarroll, was a man who liked to think that he could anticipate the outcome of most situations. In business dealings, political affairs, and escapades of a more amorous nature, the Duke of Liscarroll could always foresee the ending to any situation that might arise. And if he didn't like the ending he anticipated? Why, he steered it in a direction more suited to his needs, for he was, after all, a Duke.

What irked Peter that afternoon, as he made his way to the offices of Twattering and Philpot on Marrowbone Lane, was that he could not, for the life of him, think why he had been invited to the reading of the last will and testament of the late Earl of Humberton. There had been no love lost between the Duke and the Earl; in fact, they had been sworn enemies for many years. So, there was no reason whatsoever for Peter to be attending what was essentially a family affair. It wasn't as though the Earl had left Peter a gilded miniature of himself for the Duke to remember him by. Though, Peter thought with a reluctant smile, the old codger would probably have enjoyed the thought of having had the last laugh over him.

The enmity between the Brazils and the Percivals had begun long before Peter was born, for reasons that were never quite made clear to him. Peter's father had always held a deep dislike for the Earl, a feeling that was most obviously reciprocated, for neither man deigned to speak to the other in public. Their feud kept the ton enthralled for decades—if one man was bidding on a horse, it could be guaranteed that the other would arrive and attempt to outbid him. The same went for land, property, and—rather memorably—a rare manuscript of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. The loss of the manuscript had been like a blow to Peter's father, who had returned from Baker and Leigh's auction house in tears.

The bad blood between the Duke and the Earl had continued on for years until, one evening, it met a rather tragic end. Lord Percival had seen fit to almost bankrupt Peter's father of his fortune at the gaming tables; an act which induced a fatal apoplectic fit in the Fifth Duke and had given Peter his title at the tender age of eighteen. Peter, who had worshipped his father, had sworn that he would one day take revenge upon the Earl, and when the opportunity arose nearly a decade later, he did. The Earl of Humberton had invested heavily in a tea shipment from China, which he had financed by borrowing against his income from Downing and Co., a bank which Peter later acquired. When the shipment was lost during a terrible storm, the Earl's insurers had refused to pay out, citing an act of God. Peter, who had nursed the Brazils' grudge against the Percivals as faithfully as his father before him, saw an opportunity to strike at the Earl and exact his revenge. Peter ordered the bank call in their debts, debts which he knew the Earl would be unable to pay. The shock of becoming bankrupt had near killed Lord Percival, and he had disappeared to the country to live out the last of his years in ill-health and genteel poverty.

Thus, to say that Peter was surprised to have been included in the late Earl's will, was something of an understatement. He suspected that no good would come of his attendance, but a compelling curiosity propelled him, despite his reservations.

The offices of Twattering and Philpot were housed in one of the three-story, stucco fronted buildings which lined the street. Peter was greeted by a rather elderly clerk, who gave him an elaborate bow and bade Peter follow him in the same hushed, reverential tones that one might use in a church. With a growing sense of unease, Peter followed the hunched man down the dark corridor and into the offices of Albert Theobald Philpot the Senior.

"Ah," Philpot looked up as Peter entered the room, "You are most welcome your Grace, though a tad late by my watch."

"He's a lot late by mine," a young man rudely interrupted, casting Peter a dark scowl.

The young man was, Peter guessed, the newest Earl of Humbleton, and from the look of him Peter knew that he would like him nearly as much as the last Earl. The young Lord Percival had every look of a committed dandy; he was dressed in a pair of those ridiculous Cossack trousers, which had become the height of fashion after the visit of the Tsar, for the Peace Celebrations. Over his Cossacks, he wore a shirt with the collar standing up so that the points touched his cheeks, an affectation favoured by the dandy set. Lord Percival's cheeks were rosy like all the young Romantics'; so rosy that Peter suspected a touch of rouge. His blonde curls were dishevelled in

a style that looked natural, but that Peter's own valet had informed him took hours to create. Lord Percival's preened appearance was the very opposite of Peter's own; the Duke preferred a more classical style of dressing and if Hughes, his valet, even attempted to spend more than five minutes on his hair, Peter would end up in Newgate and the poor valet in an early grave. He was a Duke and he preferred to dress in a manner befitting of his title; classic, masculine and intimidating.

"I pray you forgive my lateness," Peter offered with a tight smile, "I wasn't quite certain if it was appropriate I come."

"That makes two of us," Percival muttered, crossing his arms in an apparent sulk.

"Why, your Grace," Philpot replied, ignoring the sulking Earl. "I would not have written to you to come, if there was not good reason to do so. One does not summon a Duke simply for fun. Now, shall we get down to business?"

The elderly solicitor began to read from the will before him in such a dry, halting manner that Peter soon found his mind drifting away. Whilst Philpot spoke of entailed lands and codicils, Peter's thoughts meandered toward the previous night's activities with his mistress, Lady Thornton. From the beginning, Peter knew that his affair with the widowed Arabella was a bad idea; she was too young and far too vain for him. Rumour that she had begun to instigate a second affair, with Lord Sandby, the Earl of Ludgate, had reached his ears, just that afternoon. The news had filled him with a cold, hard fury; not at Arabella, but at himself for having ignored his initial doubts about her. Today he would put an end to their dalliance, and once he was done with Philpot, he had every intention of having his driver take him to a jewellers, so that he could purchase her a diamond geegaw as a parting gift, as was his custom when he ended any affair.

"Your Grace?"

Philpot was looking at Peter from over the rim of his spectacles, an expression of expectation on his lined face. Peter shifted slightly in his seat, embarrassed to have been caught daydreaming.

"I didn't quite catch that," Peter said in his haughtiest voice, ignoring Lord Percival's snort of derision.

"I said," Philpot replied pointedly, "That the late Earl has left you his original manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales*."

"He has?"

Peter sat up straight; of all the things he had expected, this was the last. Why would Percival have bestowed his greatest enemy with his most prized possession?

"Yes," Philpot beamed, though his smile was followed by a quick frown, which left Peter feeling rather nervous. "Though there is one

condition, I might add."

"Of course there is," Peter rolled his eyes. He knew that the old Earl wouldn't have been that generous, even on his death bed.

"You must accept Lord Percival's daughter, Emma, into your home as your ward," Philpot continued, frowning properly now. "And see, to the best of your ability, that she is married well."

"Is that all?" Peter drawled, the sarcasm of his tone causing the barrister to wince. "Why on earth would I do that, when she has her cousin to look after her, and when I can simply purchase the manuscript myself when Percival puts it up for auction to settle his new estate's debts?"

"Well," Philpot looked highly uncomfortable as he took out a handkerchief to mop his brow. "True, Lady Emma has her cousin to look after her..."

Philpot cast Lord Percival a rather dubious look and indeed, even Peter could see, that the young Lord looked most disinterested in caring for his cousin.

"...but the manuscript, if you refuse to take it, will go to Emma and not her cousin."

And Lady Emma, like her father, would rather die than see it go to the Duke of Liscarroll. Peter shrugged; there was nothing he could do, and he did not have time to sit around discussing the matter.

"Very well," he said, rising to a stand, "Thank you for informing me of this Mr Philpot, I regret that I cannot accept Lord Percival's daughter as my ward. Good day, gentlemen."

Peter gave a quick bow and left the room, though his exit was not so fast that he didn't have time to catch a glimpse of Lord Percival's horrified face. A small stab of guilt pierced him, for he knew that Lady Emma would soon be cast out onto the streets by her nefarious cousin, though he pushed his guilt easily it aside. What did he care for Lady Emma? She meant nothing to him, and she never would.

"Is that you Peter?"

Peter's mother, Georgette, Dowager Duchess of Liscarroll, came bustling out of the drawing room, as he entered his home in St James' Square. His mother had her own residence, in fashionable Mayfair, though she did like to spend most of her afternoons in her son's home, waiting for any opportunity to remind him of her need for a grandchild. One could almost set their clock by her; come afternoon tea she could be relied upon to sit down and meticulously list off the grandchildren of all of her acquaintances, whilst simultaneously berating Peter for shirking his duties to the line.

"Mother," Peter said stiffly, bestowing a quick kiss on her soft

cheek. He attempted to hide the parcel he held in his hands behind his back, for it was wrapped in paper heavily embossed with the name Rundell and Bridge, a fashionable jewellers north of the Strand. His mother was too quick however and she narrowed her eyes as she spotted it.

"Did you buy a trinket, dear?" she asked innocently, "Is it a gift for someone?"

"It's just a snuff box, Mother," Peter replied mildly, following her into the drawing room, where tea was laid out upon the table. "Nothing special."

"Indeed."

Georgette raised her eyebrows in apparent disbelief, before waving for Peter to sit down. Peter knew that his mother was not deaf to the whispers about his numerous dalliances and that, perhaps, she even knew of his relationship with Arabella—a relationship she would most heartily disapprove of. She kept her silence, however, and bar the occasional veiled insinuation, she never hinted that she knew much of his escapades. To admit to her now that within the parcel was a diamond and ruby encrusted necklace, would be tantamount to admitting his affair; men did not buy jewellery for a woman who was not his wife. Smooth and confident as he was, even Peter could not attempt to play the necklace off as being for anyone other than a mistress.

Tea was, as usual, a resplendent affair, with miniature pastries, fruit and sweetmeats arranged artistically on china plates; it was rather overdone, for what was just tea for two. Peter suspected that his chef had put his best work into making the tiny cakes because he knew that most of it would return to the kitchen uneaten, so to spite him, he picked up a fondant and swallowed it whole.

Over tea, he listened idly as his mother chattered about the latest scandal to rock the ton; a lady's maid, with a falsified letter of recommendation from Lady Jersey, had stolen jewels worth a fortune from the Countess of Warwickshire.

"Imagine," Georgette looked horrified at the audacity of the thief, "To be so bold as to simply walk into a house and pretend to be someone else."

"It takes quite an amount of confidence, to pull that kind of thing off," Peter agreed mildly. Good servants were hard to come by and as such, he paid his retinue of staff a good wage and treated them well, in order to keep them loyal. Despite this, even he had fallen victim to a light-fingered under-butler, who had made off with half the silverware one Christmas.

"Yes. Lady Thornton was quite beside herself when she heard about it," his mother added, with a sly glance to gauge his reaction. "It

seems her own lady's maid came too on recommendation from Lady Jersey, so one can see why she was so upset. Though she was rather loud about it; she's very vocal, Lady Thornton, don't you agree?"

"Ahem," Peter cleared his throat, well aware that his mother was as skilled as Wellington at going into battle, but that rather than pistols and swords, his mother used veiled hints and insinuations to attack.

"Do you know," he began, despite not having wished to mention it to his mother, "Lord Percival left me that manuscript in his will, the Chaucer one."

"He did?"

This news was so shocking that it immediately drew Georgette's attention away from prying into her son's affairs. His mother's face was a little pale at the mention of the manuscript that had caused so much consternation, though she had always been loath to discuss the late Earl.

"Yes," Peter picked up another cake, this time an eclair, before he continued. "Though only on the condition that I take his daughter in as my ward. Can you imagine?"

Peter had not intended to reveal this fact to his mother, but the discomfort at having her mention Lady Thornton had caused him to lose his usual composure. Never complain, never explain, was the motto he lived by, and now he found himself doing quite the opposite.

"David asked you to take Emma in as your ward?"

He was surprised to hear his mother refer to the Earl by his given name; for she had never alluded to any kind of relationship with his father's late enemy. As far as Peter was concerned, his mother had never even met the late Earl of Humbleton.

"Yes," Peter replied cautiously, "Were you and Percival acquainted, Mama?"

"Only as children, our estates shared a border." Georgette blushed a little and looked down at the china cup in her hands. "Of course, then I married your father, who was David's rival since Eton and we quite lost touch. Imagine, he thought of *you* to care for his daughter..."

"Until such time as she is well married," Peter snorted, directly quoting the stuffy Philpot.

"I wonder who shall take her in if you don't?" his mother mused aloud, her brow creased in an anxious frown.

Peter stifled a groan; he knew that his mother was now grappling with the same worries for Lady Emma that he had already dealt with. Unlike him, however, his mother had a soft heart and would not push her concerns away as easily as her son.

"I'm sure that her cousin will step up," Peter replied brusquely, hoping to lay the matter to rest.

"That glorified dandy?" Georgette snorted, an act so unlike her that Peter knew she was more than a little unsettled. "Why, it's well known that he's already been borrowing heavily on the expectation of his inheritance—an inheritance that is most diminished, thanks to you."

"Lud, Mother," Peter groaned, "That was a matter of business."

"Yes, cold-hearted business," Georgette replied sternly, "Now, perhaps, we have a chance to show a little grace and charity to the girl."

"Are you really suggesting that I take the girl in and make her my ward?"

If Peter hadn't known his mother so well, he might have been able to convince himself that she was jesting. Unfortunately, he did know his mother, and he knew by the determined tilt of her chin that she would have her way.

"I'm not suggesting anything," the Dowager Duchess replied serenely, as she deposited a tiny, lemon tart upon his plate. "I am instructing. You take that girl in Peter and take that manuscript while you're at it, and then you shall have killed two birds with one stone."

"I can't see how that is," Peter replied mulishly, knowing that he would be forced to do his mother's bidding no matter how much he protested. The only person in the world immune to the power of his title was his mother.

"Well, if I am focusing all my attention on finding a husband for Lady Emma, then I can't possibly harass you about finding a bride, now can I?"

Peter, who had no reply to her reason, picked up the tart and chewed thoughtfully.

"Did I mention that Lord Delroy married?" the Duchess continued blithely. "And your housekeeper has it on good authority that his new wife is already increasing. Oh, I do wish that you would settle down, Peter. Imagine this house filled with the pitter-patter of—"

"Alright," Peter growled, throwing his eyes up to heaven, "We shall take the blasted girl in. Though I will have nothing to do with her, do you hear? You can take charge of her and find her a husband, if that is what you wish. Just don't involve me in any of your escapades and—pay heed—I will not set one foot in ruddy Almack's."

"I wouldn't dream of asking you to, dear," his mother replied demurely, a smile of triumph on her face. "Would you like another tart?"

"No," Peter could not bear the thought of forcing another lemon tart down his throat, for he was bitter enough as it was. His mother had won, she had bested him in a game he hadn't even realised he was playing until it was over, and he was furious with himself, for it was

all his own fault.

Let Lady Emma come, he thought sourly, and I'll marry her off to the first man I can find with a pulse.

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Chapter Two

"I know it's rather an unpalatable proposition, but it was what your father wanted, dear."

Unpalatable? Lady Emma Percival could think of a number of other words to describe living with the Duke of Liscarroll and unpalatable was the mildest of all.

Emma somehow managed to hold her tongue, despite the dictionary of blue insults that she wished to direct at the odious Duke, for it was not he who stood before her, but his mother. She had never met the Dowager Duchess, though of course, she had glimpsed her at some of the gatherings she had attended during her first season. That season had been cut short, due to her father's illness, and she had not had another opportunity to meet with the Duchess, until now.

Georgette, as she had introduced herself as, was still a beautiful woman, and in her eyes, Emma was astonished to see a motherly kindness. Not that she could be counted upon to recognise motherly kindness, for her own mother had died in childbirth.

"I rather fear, your Grace," Emma replied diplomatically, "That my father was not quite in his right mind towards the end of his illness."

Which was a lie, for David Albert Percival had been as sharp as a pin until his death, dictating letters of business to his dutiful daughter and ordering the servants about until his final minute.

"Be that as it may," the Duchess replied, looking for all the world as though this piece of information had upset her, "He made quite the right decision in appointing Peter as your guardian."

"I don't quite see how, your Grace?" Emma replied, diplomatically. What reason did her father have for appointing his arch enemy as her protector? The Duke of Liscarroll was a heard-hearted, cold, brute of a man, and Emma could not stomach the thought of having him in charge of her affairs. She remembered well

the day that the banks had foreclosed on her father; the Earl's health had deteriorated almost overnight, and Emma and her father had found themselves near paupers. If there was one person in the world whom Emma would happily shoot dead, it was the Duke of Liscarroll, so she could not bear the thought of him as her guardian.

"Well," the corners of the Duchess' lips twitched with a suppressed smile as she answered Emma's question. "I like to think that he wasn't actually appointing Peter, but rather me. Your father and I were close friends as children—perhaps he thought that I might offer more help than your Aunt. How is she, dear?"

Emma pursed her lips as she thought of her aunt, who was the widow of her father's late brother and mother of the new Earl of Humbleton. Eunice Percival had arrived at Emma's home, Humbleton Manor, a week after her father had died, and had immediately set to work "modernising" the stately house. Her aunt had not deigned to wear blacks and had showed little respect for her niece's bereaved state. Watching the woman destroy what had been her childhood home, had sent Emma fleeing to London, to escape her aunt.

"My aunt possesses a unique way of dealing with people," Emma again offered diplomatically, whilst wondering if perhaps she should have considered a career as a politician. Alas, as with most careers she might have liked to pursue, she was completely the wrong gender.

"Goodness, child," the Duchess laughed, her eyes crinkling at the corners in amusement, "I have never heard Eunice Percival described in quite such gracious tones. Am I correct in guessing that her unique way of dealing with people is the reason why you are currently living away from her?"

"You are quite correct, your Grace," Emma conceded, smothering her own smile of mirth behind her hand.

"And how do you fare with your cousin?" the Duchess continued to probe, "For it is he who will be responsible for you if you refuse to accept Peter as your guardian."

Emma remained silent; her diplomatic skills were not so great that she could muster an enthusiastic response to the Duchess' question. Her cousin Reese, or Lord Percival as he was now styled, was everything she detested in a man; lazy, selfish and self entitled. That he viewed Emma as a burden was no secret and he openly despaired at her unmarried state. He had returned from the reading of her father's will, filled with a manic energy, decrying that he would find Emma a husband before the month's end—or she would find a new home.

"My cousin would like to see me married, quite soon," Emma offered, unable to look the Duchess in the eye. "He has expressed a preference for me finding a man of means, though failing that, he has

said that one with a pulse would also suffice."

"Oh, dear."

Emma felt her bottom lip begin to tremble perilously and she valiantly held back tears. Her life before her father's death had been peaceful, if a little dull, and she had known that one day she must marry. Having had no sons, her father's estates were always going to pass on to Reese, but she had thought she might have more time to find a husband. Now, with Reese pressing her to accept any offer of marriage that came her way, she feared she might end up marrying a street sweep. Even worse, she thought sadly, was that a life as the wife of a street sweep seemed far more appealing than a life as Reese's poor cousin.

"I feel, my dear," the Duchess leaned over and took Emma's hand in her own, "That your cousin is not fit to find you a husband. What you need is a woman on your side, for only a woman could understand how important this undertaking is for your future happiness."

"I cannot ask you to show me such charity, your Grace," Emma replied helplessly, touched by Georgette's sincere offer of help but, still, her pride could not allow her to accept it.

"It is not charity," the Duchess replied, affronted at the suggestion. "Your father quite probably remembered that as a girl, I longed for a sister and then as a mother, I also longed for a daughter. My life has been filled with men, I know that I am blessed because of it, but perhaps, as a parting gift, your father entrusted you into my care."

Emma was taken aback by how misty eyed the Duchess had become and also by the stinging tears she felt in her own eyes. She had not expected that in her time of need, the mother of the man she so reviled, would become her knight in shining armour. Or rather Duchess in shining, twilled, French silk, Emma thought a little wildly, stifling a hysterical giggle.

"Well," Georgette probed, "What say you, child?"

"I say thank you, your Grace," Emma replied humbly, "I can't think of anyone in this world I would like on my side, more than you."

Liscarroll House, the Duke's imposing residence on St James' Square, was far grander than Emma had anticipated. She arrived late in the afternoon, carrying only a battered portmanteau and was immediately shown to her room by a deferential chamber maid.

As they moved up the sweeping staircase, they passed by portraits of all the previous Dukes of Liscarroll, and Emma felt as though their eyes followed her every step, judging her.

"That's the current Duke," the maid offered timidly, stopping

before the last portrait in the upstairs hallway. "He looks rather fierce in that, but don't let that frighten you. He's only half as bad in real life."

Emma paused to take in the painting, curious to see what the man her father had so reviled looked like. She had known the Duke was young, but she had not expected him to be so handsome. The painting portrayed a young man, in the prime of his life; even from the artist's depiction, Emma could see how muscular and athletic his body was and how sinfully handsome his features. She took a step back, a little alarmed by her reaction to what was, after all, just a painting.

"He does look rather fierce," Emma offered, casting the maid a smile. Inside her mind was waging a battle; she hated the Duke of Liscarroll, but as a guest in his home, she could not malign him to the servants.

"Fierce isn't the word, my Lady," the maid said, as she continued to lead Emma down a corridor that seemed interminable in length. "He's petrifying—ain't no one shirking their duties in this house, believe me."

On that ominous note about her host, the maid showed Emma into the bed-chamber that was to be hers for the foreseeable future. The first thing that struck Emma, was the room's enormity; it had a double height ceiling and arched, bay windows which looked out onto the square. On one side of the room was a large bed, whose lush, velvet drapes matched with those of the curtains on the window. On the other side of the room was a mahogany fireplace in which a large fire roared, despite the afternoon sun, and beside that an overstuffed Queen Ann chair, that Emma could well envisage curling up to read in.

"Lud," she whispered, twirling around, her head craned back as she took in the corniced ceiling and the large, glittering chandelier. "I've never seen such an elegant bed-chamber."

"It is nice, isn't it?" the chamber maid agreed, obviously pleased by Emma's reaction. "Now, Mrs Rudd, the housekeeper, is sending up Tilly, her Grace's maid, to dress you for the evening. She's hoping that you'll have your own maid by tomorrow, so you'll have to make do with old Till for now—don't let her talk you into wearing a turban, mind."

"Am I going somewhere?" Emma asked stupidly, for the Duchess had not informed her of any intended outings. She glanced longingly at the bed, which was piled high with pillows and dressed in a soft, velvet coverlet.

"Heavens, of course you are," the maid replied with a laugh, "The season's only just begun. Her Grace has a dozen invites for tonight

alone, but tonight she's taking you to just one party--Lady Castlereagh's rout."

Lady Castlereagh was one of the patronesses of Alamck's. Emma guessed that the Duchess was bringing her with a mind to procure a voucher for the exclusive assembly rooms where the best of the ton paraded all their daughters for prospective husbands to view. Goodness, Emma thought with alarm, the Dowager Duchess moved quickly.

"I am still in mourning," Emma protested, feeling unprepared for such an event. Her black day dress was made from heavy bombazine and within her portmanteau were half a dozen similar mourning dresses. She was mentally, as well as sartorially, unprepared for an evening amongst the beau monde.

"How long is it since your father passed?" the maid, whose name Emma was yet to learn, asked kindly.

"Just gone six months," Emma conceded; mourning periods were loosely observed in society, a widow was expected to mourn her husband for at least a year, and a daughter to mourn her father for half that length. Emma knew that she should be casting off her blacks, but the dark colours had become something of a comfort to her. In public she could not express the sadness she felt, but at least her clothes could speak for her loss when she could not.

"Half-mourning would be wholly appropriate, Lady Emma," another voice called, interrupting the conversation. The woman who had spoken was, Emma guessed, the Duchess' lady's maid. Tilly, as she introduced herself as, was about thirty years of age, and had the brusque manner of a physician.

"I sent to Madame Lloris on Conduit Street," Tilly explained cheerfully, as she laid a dress upon the bed that Emma was aching to crawl into. "She had one sample dress left, suitable for both the evening and half-mourning. It was rather a stroke of luck...although her Grace did not tell me you were blonde."

Tilly looked quite displeased at this fact, her thin eyebrows drawn together into a scowl as she glanced from the dress on the bed to Emma.

"Is that a problem?" Emma asked, wondering what on earth it was that she was missing.

"Well, personally I would never put a blonde into a lilac dress," Tilly sighed, as she began to bustle around Emma, removing pins from her hair. "But beggars can't be choosers and we'll have time tomorrow to have Madame Lloris decide what colours will suit you best for your other dresses."

More dresses? Emma looked at the dress on the bed, which was made from worked, French muslin and had a raft of flounces and

tucks. It was obvious that, even though it was just a sample, it was probably the most expensive dress Emma had ever owned. She wondered if the Dowager Duchess, who had seemed so sharp that morning, realised just how much of a financial quandary Emma was in.

Embarrassing as it was, Emma would have to let the Duchess know that there would be no extra evening dresses, ball gowns or riding habits for her this season—she would have to find a way to rework this dress and her others, so that it was not too obvious she possessed only a limited wardrobe.

Tilly sent the chamber maid, whose name Emma learned was Sally, to fetch water for a bath. A bath had initially sounded like heaven to Emma, but she soon discovered that it was to be just the beginning of hours of torture.

Once she was washed, Tilly assisted her with dressing; producing a chemise, stays and petticoats, that also must have arrived from Madam Lloris, as they were sparkling white in their newness. Then, after Emma had been wrestled into these garments, Tilly gave her a gown to wear, whilst she set about dressing her hair.

"We shall try it *à la Méduse*, I think," the lady's maid said, with the same serious tones that a judge might use when delivering a sentence. Indeed, Tilly was as devout to the act of hair-dressing as any judge might be to his chambers. She spent hours, curling Emma's hair into long ringlets with curling papers, which she then piled atop her head, to create a natural look.

"What do you think?" Tilly asked leading Emma to a mirror to assess her work.

Emma looked up, so that she could see her reflection and let out a sigh of relief. When the name Medusa had been mentioned, she had envisaged her head covered in snake-like ringlets; instead she found that Tilly had created a most charming, natural effect.

"I adore it," Emma replied truthfully, for her hair was the nicest it had ever looked. That the style was worth the hours that went in to it, was debatable in her mind, though she did not say this to the lady's maid. Once Tilly had declared her hair finished, she helped Emma step into the evening gown, which was laced with black ribbons to befit her half-mourning status, and a pair of black, elbow length gloves.

"You are a picture, my Lady," the lady's maid stated, a gleam of satisfaction in her eyes.

As well as being a professed "picture", Emma was also tired, irritable and more than a little hungry. Was this what ladies did every evening before they went out? No wonder so many of them were prone to fits of the vapours, she thought with alarm.

Still, Emma held her tongue and made her way downstairs, to where the Dowager Duchess was waiting. Georgette too was dressed for an evening amongst the ton, in a deep ruby dress made of silk, with a turban to match.

"Oh, my dear," Georgette exclaimed, clapping her hands with glee. "I feel you shall cause quite the stir at Lady Castlereagh's."

"Thank you, your Grace," Emma replied, holding back the yawn which threatened. She had thought that the Duchess would slowly introduce her to society, but it seemed she wanted Emma to make a splash.

The two ladies departed in one of the Duke's carriages and travelled the short distance to Lady Castlereagh's home, chatting comfortably. Georgette, it transpired, had moved residence whilst Tilly was battling with Emma's curls, and she would now be staying in Liscarroll House.

"Does the Duke not mind?" Emma asked nervously, remembering his fierce expression in the portrait.

"The Duke does not yet know," Georgette replied with a mischievous smile.

Emma would have protested, had the carriage not drawn to a halt. The two ladies disembarked with the help of a footman and Emma followed the Duchess up the steps and into the home of Lady Castlereigh.

"Georgette," Lady Castlereagh purred in greeting to the Duchess, her almond shaped eyes quickly slipping past the older woman to Emma. "And who do we have here?"

"Emma, allow me to introduce Lady Castlereagh," Georgette said, officiating the introduction with a warm smile. "Emily, this is Lady Emma Percival, my son's ward."

Georgette graced her hostess with a mysterious smile as her eyebrows raised in query in response to this news. Instead of answering, Georgette gently prodded Emma into the large drawing room, which was crowded with people.

"That will get the tabbies whispering," the Duchess said gleefully, as she led Emma into the throng of people. There were hundreds of people in Lady Castlereagh's drawing room; a pianoforte could be heard, valiantly doing battle with the roar and laughter of the crowd. Emma was elbowed, poked, and prodded as she followed the Duchess through the thronged apartments. Such was the crush, that Emma soon found herself separated from Georgette and without the Duchess as her talisman, she soon felt rather overwhelmed. News that the Duke of Liscarroll had taken Emma as his ward must have spread, for she felt the eyes of all those gathered staring at her curiously.

She was beginning to feel suffocated from all the noise and

attention, and feared she might actually succumb to a fit of the vapours—something she had never done in her life. With a composed face and her back to the wall, Emma sidled to the nearest door, eager to make her exit. Once she was outside, in a mercifully quiet corridor, Emma took a deep breath.

She knew that she would have to go back inside and face the other guests at some point, but just for this minute, she wanted to relax.

"My, my; what do we have here?" a low voiced drawled.

Emma turned at the voice and was shocked to find herself face to face with none other than the Duke of Liscarroll. And, judging by the curious look upon his handsome face, he didn't seem to have any idea who she was.

#

Chapter Three

White's was Peter's usual choice of venue for a late night snifter of whiskey on his way home after an evening of socialising. Tonight, as he entered the hallowed rooms of the exclusive gentleman's club, he rather felt he needed a bottle of the stuff rather than just a glass.

Peter, who had thought he was adept at reading every situation, had been faced with two rather dramatic and unexpected events over the course of his evening.

The first had occurred when he had met with Lady Thornton, in a discreet apartment in Mivart's Hotel, on Brook Street. The hotel, which was often used by the Regent, was the epitome of tasteful discretion, and was the location picked by Peter to carry out his affair with the beautiful Arabella.

When he had arrived, he had found that Arabella was laid out on the brocade couch waiting for him, her almond eyes sulky as she greeted him. He was late; in fact, he had been late for the last few of their meetings and he could tell that she sensed he was losing interest.

"You took your time," Arabella pouted, rising from the sofa to greet him. She wore a most scandalous dress, which was cut low at the bodice; designed, no doubt, to draw attention to her rather admirable bosom. Once, Peter might have found this exciting, but the more he got to know Arabella, the less excited he became by her. Her beauty, which he had thought was classical, he now saw as harsh, as though every feature was cut from cold glass. There was little between them, bar passion, and now that passion had faded, there was nothing at all. The thought left Peter feeling rather depressed; had he finally become a jaded rake?

Peter gave a curt bow in greeting and produced the parcel from Rundell and Bridge for her to inspect.

"Is that for me?" Arabella's dark eyebrows had narrowed into a frown at the sight of it.

"I saw it and thought of you," Peter replied, easing himself gently into what he knew would be a delicate process. He knew that Arabella had designs on herself becoming the next Duchess of Liscarroll, an idea which, even before she had taken up with Lord Sandby, Peter would have found laughable. By ending the affair, Peter would be stealing away her aspirations, and Arabella was prone to lash out when hurt.

Hurt by the loss of my title and not me, myself, Peter thought wryly.

His compliment had seemed to appease Arabella, for her full, luscious lips spread into a cat-like grin. Thank goodness she did not know that the cold, bloodless diamonds were what had reminded him of her, and not their beauty.

"Diamonds," she breathed, as she unwrapped the layers of tissue paper to reveal the necklace Peter had purchased. "What have you done, you naughty boy, to make you buy me such an extravagant gift?"

"It's rather what I feel we should stop doing," Peter replied, his tone like ice.

Arabella's head snapped up and she looked at him with narrowed, dangerous eyes.

"I do not take kindly to being cuckolded," Peter said in reply to her sharp look, "You must have known that for our affair to continue, that I would expect no less than exclusivity on your part?"

"Yes, but only I was expected to remain faithful," she spat, her beautiful face now rendered harsh in anger. "How do you expect me to react when I had heard that you had taken up with Madame Choburt?"

Madame Choburt, an opera singer from Paris, was the current darling of the ton. Peter too had heard rumours that he was having an affair with the enigmatic, French woman; though he had never met her before in his life. He had suspected that the rumours had been started by someone close to Madame Choburt—to add mystery and scandal to her reputation—and he had simply ignored them. That Arabella had heard of this supposed affair, and reacted by taking a lover of her own, gave credence to Peter's initial reservations; Lady Thornton was too young and too insecure for him. He was not the type of man to engage in petty jealousies.

"It is not just the fact that you have taken up with Ludgate, Arabella," Peter fought to stave off a tone of boredom, "It is the fact

that there is nothing between us bar lust. We have no conversation, no common interests..."

He trailed off quietly, his words adding to the weighted feeling of ennui he was experiencing. How had he become this man? In his younger years, he had been filled with hope, morals and purpose; but a decade as a Duke, with all the tawdry delights of the *demi-monde* at his disposal, had left him jaded. Once, perhaps, he would have called Ludgate out for approaching his mistress; now he was more inclined to send the man a thank you card.

"It has ended, Arabella," Peter concluded, giving her a curt nod. "Let's not pretend that either of us is in anyway upset and we can part on fond terms."

"You will regret this Peter," Arabella retorted, not heeding, or wishing to heed, his offer of peace. "Mark my words; one day you shall be looking down the barrel of a pistol and it is I who will be holding it."

"Well, you obviously weren't that in love with me, if you're so eager to shoot me dead," Peter drawled, slightly shocked by the anger and venom in her voice.

With a screech of rage at his calm words, Arabella picked up the nearest object to her—a porcelain vase—and flung it at Peter's head. It hit him right on the temple, exploding into smithereens which then fell upon the lush, Oriental carpet.

"I shall ask them to add that to the bill," Peter said stiffly, with as much dignity as he could muster. He gave a curt bow, sensing blood trickling down his forehead, and left.

Once outside, he mopped his bloody forehead with a silk handkerchief and gave a sigh of irritation. That had not gone as he had planned, but it was probably no less than what he deserved.

Vowing to stay away from women for the foreseeable future, Peter then made his way to his carriage, which was waiting for him on Brook Street. His old friend, Lord Amberford, Marquess of Halsford, was in town and would tonight be in attendance at Lady Castlereagh's rout. Peter detested routs, for they were simply an exercise in being seen, though with very little enjoyment to compensate for the crush, but he rather thought that Amberford could be persuaded into leaving early for a game of cards in White's.

"Oh, there you are Liscarroll," Lady Castlereagh said in greeting as Peter arrived a half hour later, "You've been the talking point of the night."

"That's rather an accomplishment, seeing as I've only just arrived," Peter replied lazily; Lady Castlereagh was typical of the tabbies of the ton, full of gossip and insinuation.

"True, but your beautiful ward preceded your arrival," his hostess

gave him a triumphant smile, as she noted his look of shock. "Who would have expected you to be so kind-hearted as to take in Lord Percival's orphaned daughter?"

"You know me, Emily," Peter drawled, already thoroughly sick of Lady Castlereagh after only two minutes of conversation, "I'm full of surprises."

"Yes, you do like to keep us all on your toes," the Viscountess agreed with a saucy wink.

Struggling to retain his composure, Peter gave his hostess a tight smile and made his way into the thronged apartments. It seemed everyone who was anyone was there; Peter spotted politicians, the opera singer he was supposed to be having an affair with, dozens of beautiful debutantes in white dresses, and, in the middle of them all, his mother.

"You are like a beautiful, deadly bird of prey in that turban, Mama," Peter said, as he greeted Georgette with a kiss to the hand.

"How silly, darling," his mother laughed, the ostrich feather in her turban bouncing merrily, "I am my usual self, your dear own mother-hen."

"What a wonderful analogy," Peter grinned, "For you've caused no amount of clucking amongst the hens in your brood by introducing my new ward tonight."

He could sense that every eye in the place was upon him, perhaps waiting to see if he would acknowledge this Lady Emma Percival. He glanced dismissively at the young ladies in white; even if he had wanted to approach Lady Percival, he would have not been able to pick her out from the crowd. His mother had thought that she was being rather clever, presenting Emma tonight as his ward—but it could all go horribly wrong, for there was a danger he could accidentally give the girl the cut. Now that would set the cat among the pigeons...or the hens, he thought with a wry smile.

After conversing for a short while with his mother and her companions, Peter bade Georgette a good evening and pushed through the crowd in search of Amberford, but instead of the Marquess he found his sister, Lady Olwynn.

"He's already made his escape to White's," Olwynn said, with a roll of her eyes as Peter enquired into Amberford's whereabouts.

"I rather think I'll join him," Peter replied, as a petite debutante came crashing into him, pushed his way by the force of the crowd. The poor girl took one look at the Duke, turned white as her dress, and positively fled.

"I see you haven't lost your touch with the green-girls," Olwynn hid her laugh behind a gloved hand. Peter had a reputation as being rather unapproachable; it was one that he had cultivated carefully, for

he did not care to be approached by anyone, least of debutantes.

"Thank goodness for that," he remarked and, with a bow, left once more.

It was impossible to move with all the guests crushed together. Even though most of the furniture had been removed to make space, Peter still felt rather claustrophobic. He spotted a door and made for it, escaping out into a dark hallway.

He was alone for just a few seconds, when the door opened again and a young woman hurried through, breathing an audible sigh of relief as she escaped the crush. Every one of Peter's nerves pricked with interest at the sight of the woman, and his earlier vow to eschew female company left his head. This young woman was breathtaking; her alabaster skin, her honey-blonde hair, the curves of her figure. Peter had not been so entranced by a woman since—well, he could not remember the last time he had found a lady's beauty so hypnotising.

"My, my; what do we have here?" he drawled.

The young lady turned to look his way, her expression startled. Her eyes, which were a deep blue, were wary as she took the measure of him.

Peter could have cursed his opening gambit; it was obvious that this lady was a lady, and as such would not tolerate the innuendo that the ladies of the *demi monde* lapped up. What had possessed him to greet her as though she were a light skirt parading her wares on the docks?

"My apologies," he said, hoping that he sounded somewhat apologetic, for he wasn't quite used to the act. "I did not mean to startle you, Miss—?"

The full, rosebud lips of the lady before him quirked with amusement. A shiver of irritation coursed through Peter at her expression, for she appeared to be laughing at a joke he was not in on. He was not used to being mocked—he was a Duke, after all.

"No need to apologise, your Grace," the young lady said, inclining her head. "You did not frighten me, you simply took me unawares."

Peter waited for her to continue, or to introduce herself to him, but she simply stood in silence, watching him with an alluring, cat-like smile.

"Are we acquainted?" he asked curiously, for she seemed to know him. "Though I am sure I would have remembered being introduced to a lady as beautiful as you."

"You are too kind, your Grace," the corners of the woman's mouth were now most definitely twitching from suppressed laughter. "We have not met before, but I believe we will be spending rather a lot of time together in the future."

"We will?" Peter gave her a dark, wolfish smile; so, she was adept at innuendo, despite her innocent appearance?

"Yes, we will. For I am, after all, your ward."

Knock me down with a feather, Peter thought with shock; so this vivacious, curvaceous temptress was his ward? He had pictured an annoying, timid debutante—not a grown woman with knowing eyes and a mocking smile.

Irritation coursed through him as the weight of what she had said settled on his mind; she had led him on to look the fool for her own amusement. He bristled with annoyance as he noticed that her eyes were still dancing with laughter—oh, Lady Percival was every inch her father's daughter.

"I would say that I am pleased to finally meet your acquaintance," Peter replied darkly, "But I'm rather displeased to find that I have taken on a ward who skulks in dark corridors and converses with strange men."

The injustice of his accusation obviously rankled Lady Percival, for she placed her hands on her hips and cast him a most quelling glare.

"I was not skulking," Lady Percival protested, her blue eyes flashing with anger. "I was merely escaping the crush inside—not unlike you."

"No," Peter countered, enjoying the sparring match despite himself, "I am leaving, not escaping. There is a difference. And I am a man, I can do as I please. You, on the other hand..."

He trailed off and cast her a malevolent smile, thoroughly relishing the thought of provoking her even further, for anger had transformed her cool, innocent beauty into pure fire.

"You are my ward and, as such, it is my responsibility to protect your reputation," he said, allowing his gaze to rake her from top to toe. "Go back inside to my mother before anyone else catches you here. She will take you back to Mayfair."

He had just stopped short of saying that he would put her over his knee if she objected, a thought which stirred him greatly. He was no fool though; Lady Percival would probably have beaten him to death with her beaded reticule if he had voiced anything so base.

He gave Emma a triumphant smile, though it faltered as her lips curled into a smug smile of her own.

"Mayfair?" Lady Percival cocked her eyebrow, her voice inflicted with artful confusion. "Why, I am not staying in Mayfair, your Grace. I am staying in Liscarroll House, along with your mother."

His mother had moved the blasted girl into his home? Peter kept the expression on his face neutral as he regarded his ward coolly.

"You won't be there for long," he said, his eyes narrowing even

further. "You'll be marrying the first man with a pulse who proposes. Good night, my Lady."

Peter pivoted on his heel and stalked toward the entrance hall, passing Lady Castlereagh without so much as a glance. No doubt, she would take offence, but what did he care—it wasn't as though he would be begging her for an Almack's voucher any time soon.

When he had arrived at White's, the club had been abuzz; filled with men who had made their obligatory appearances at whatever event their wife had dragged them to and now wished to relax. Peter found Raff seated at the famous bow window, deep in conversation with Old Colonel Masterson.

Both men looked up as Peter approached and a broad grin spread across Raff's handsome face.

"Here he is," Raff said, placing the book in his hand upon the table as Peter approached. He did not need to glance twice to know what it was that Lord Amberford had been holding; the infamous betting book of White's.

"Oh, Lud," Peter sighed as he sat down, beckoning a footman to fetch him a drink. "What now?"

"Rumour has it," Raff began, casting Colonel Masterson a smile, "That you've taken Lord Percival's daughter in as your ward and that you're obliged to marry her off."

"For once there is truth to a rumour you have voiced," Peter conceded, eliciting a triumphant grin from his friend.

"Told you, old boy," Raff said confidently to the Colonel, "Now, how much did you want to stake on Lord Neville?"

"Five pounds," Masterson said from behind his moustache. Peter could smell the alcohol on the man's breath from where he sat—and the man would have to be drunk to put five pounds on the insipid Lord Neville marrying Lady Percival. Lord Neville's cheeks were still round with puppy fat and he was far too timid a boy for a woman like Emma Percival. What she needed was a man, Peter thought irritably; Neville would not do.

"Do you have anything to add?" Raff asked innocently, breaking through Peter's thoughts, "For you seem to be making a lot of belligerent noises, Liscarroll. Does Lord Neville not meet your approval, or have you merely been spending more time in the stables of late?"

"He's too young," Peter interjected irritably, giving a snort of derision as he once more thought of Lady Percival married to that milk-sop. Sensing the look on his friend's face, Peter quickly caught himself; good God, he was braying like a horse.

"I might throw my hat into the ring," Raff said quietly, as Masterson stumbled off to another table. "Your mother introduced me

to your delectable ward just this evening. You won't have much trouble finding a man to put a ring on her finger, old boy."

"You?" Peter raised a dark eyebrow in question. "You would leg-shackle yourself to a woman of very little means and even less personality?"

"Who needs means when you have..."

Lord Amberford trailed off as he attempted to illustrate with his hands exactly what Lady Percival had. From where Peter sat, it looked as though his friend was attempting to draw an hourglass in the air with his hands; a rather apt, if highly crude, description of Lady Percival's assets.

"Enough," Peter growled, the hairs on the back of his neck prickling with annoyance. "I didn't come here to discuss the dashed ward my mother forced upon me. I shall find her a husband before the month's end, don't you worry. In the meantime, her father bequeathed me the Chaucer manuscript."

"He didn't?" Raff whistled in admiration at the news.

"He did," Peter nodded, allowing himself a moment of satisfaction. His mother might have scuppered his present happiness by moving herself and the blasted Lady Percival into his home, but he could not let that take away from the satisfaction he felt at finally owning the manuscript which his late father had so coveted.

"I shall need someone to take a look at it," Peter continued, "Did you say you knew a fellow from the Bodleian?"

"Humphreys," Raff nodded, not looking up from the betting book, which he was scribbling into. "Nice old chap; I'll send for him, if you like? Dare say he could use a pound or two to feather his pension pot."

"Thank you," Peter replied, "I've a mind to have him catalogue a few of my father's other works while he's here. Now, enough about dusty old books, fancy a game of loo?"

"Not tonight, old boy," Raff shook his head regretfully. "I've an early start tomorrow; have to meet a man about a horse."

Raff threw the betting book down upon the table and rose to stand, an amused smile on his handsome face.

"Dare say I'll see you soon, Liscarroll," he said with a wink, then left, waving to his acquaintances as he weaved his way across the room. Peter watched his friend until he disappeared through the room's double doors, then settled himself back into his seat. He was in no hurry to go home, not when his mother had turned his bachelor sanctuary into an orphanage for recalcitrant wards. Instead, Peter raised his hand and beckoned for the footman to fetch him another brandy. As he waited for his drink to arrive, Peter picked up the betting book, whose pages were well thumbed, and flicked to the back pages. Here, he could see, that a flurry of bets about who would claim

Lady Percival's hand had been placed just that evening. To his chagrin, he saw Lord Neville's name written more than once. He would have to put a stop to that, Peter thought churlishly, an irrational dislike for the young buck causing him to scowl.

His eyes then drifted to the last line on the page, where Raff had just written his own bet, and Peter felt a jolt of shock. Lord Amberford had bet one-hundred pounds on who Lady Percival's husband would be, and the man that he had named was none other than Peter himself.

#

Chapter Four

Being more accustomed to life in the countryside, Emma awoke at the unfashionably early hour of seven. She watched from the window of her bedroom, as below on the square, servants and delivery men bustled to and fro, preparing for the masters of the houses to awaken.

Emma idled away two hours, reading from a novel she found on the shelf, before boredom and hunger compelled her to dress. She washed in the cold water in the basin on her *armoire* and dressed herself in the dark, bombazine day dress she had packed. To add to the sombre effect, she donned a cap, to cover her hair. If she were to analyse her motivation for dressing up in the dowdy uniform of a spinster in mourning, Emma would have realised that it was because she wished to hide from her host.

The memory of how his ice blue eyes had traversed her body so impudently last night had haunted her dreams. His haughty, domineering manner had rankled her pride, but his handsome face had shaken her body to its very core.

He is just a handsome face, nothing more; she told herself firmly as she exited her bed-chamber and made her way downstairs. She did not meet a single servant until she reached the entrance hall, where she found Sally rounding the corner carrying a bucket of coal.

"Oh, my Lady," Sally started as she caught sight of Emma. "Forgive me, I would have used the back stairs; I did not think anyone was awake."

"Please, don't apologise," Emma replied, knowing full well that if she had to heft a bucket of coal up numerous flights of stairs, that she too would use the quickest route. "I fear I rise earlier than most ladies of fashion. Can you tell me where I might find the dining room?"

Sally directed her toward the dining room, and here, at least,

Emma found signs of life. Arranged on the side-board were plates of rolls, bread and butter, and cold meats, and standing beside that was a footman, who eagerly went to fetch her a pot of chocolate when she asked.

"Thank you," Emma said, as he returned and placed the steaming jug before her. "Do you think her Grace will be up soon?"

"My mother rarely rises before noon," a familiar, deep voice called from behind her.

Emma turned and found the Duke standing in the doorway, dressed impeccably in a dark coat over light breeches. His dark hair was tousled, as though he had been out riding, and in his hand, he held the morning papers.

"I fear that it is my habit to rise early," Emma replied, turning her attention back to her plate, "No matter what late hour I went to bed at."

It had been well past midnight when Emma and Georgette had returned from Lady Castlereagh's, an hour which Georgette had declared as early. Emma did not know if she would be able to keep up with the Dowager Duchess, who had confessed that she usually would have dropped in on a ball, or another soiree, before retiring.

"My mother does enjoy the social whirl," Liscarroll agreed, throwing his large frame into the chair at the top of the table. He proceeded to ignore Emma, instead focusing his attention on the paper and sipping on the coffee that the footman had placed before him without having to be asked.

Emma eyed him surreptitiously as she buttered her bread roll; really, he was just a man, not a monster whom she should fear. This thought died a quick death, as the Duke lifted his eyes from the paper and caught her looking at him. His penetrating, cool gaze, left her open-mouthed as a shock of desire coursed through her. To her chagrin, his lips quirked with conceited amusement as he noted her reaction. Oh, Emma stifled a harrumph of irritation, the blasted man would probably think her in love with him, like all the other silly girls of the ton.

"You made quite the debut, despite your dreadful taste in hats," Liscarroll observed, leaning forward to slide the paper in his hand across to Emma, his eyes lingering on the cap upon her head. Emma took the paper cautiously, as though it were a trap, which elicited an irritated growl from the Duke.

"I haven't poisoned the blasted thing," he said, picking up a knife which he then used to cut savagely into the bread roll on his plate. "There's a bit about you in the bottom right-hand corner."

Emma's eyes dropped to the column he had pointed out, and she hid a gasp behind her hand as she saw her name written in dark ink.

"Liscarroll takes a ward," she read the headline aloud, "Though who will take her hand?"

The column then went on to detail that the Duke was seeking a husband for his newfound charge, before listing several young men the author thought might be suitable for the position.

"Lord Neville threw his hat into the ring quite quickly," Emma continued to whisper aloud, "And from the look of pleasure on Lady Percival's face as the young Viscount danced attendance, this column would wager a few bob on him winning the fair lady's hand."

Disgusted, Emma threw the paper down on the table and cast the Duke a dark look.

"Why, it's ridiculous," she protested, picking up a teaspoon and stirring her chocolate vigorously. "We only spoke for a minute at most."

"Don't upset yourself too much," Liscarroll waved her annoyance away with a lazy hand. "The only truth that rag ever prints is the date, and even then, you'd want to double check it. Though it's a good start."

"How is having my name linked with Lord Neville's a good start?" Emma retorted, her anger seeking a target and finding an easy one in the Duke. "He is just eighteen; not even finished at Oxford. I am seeking a husband, not a position as a governess."

Her cutting remark earned a snort of laughter from the Duke, which quickly died once his eyes met hers. It was as though he had forgotten for a second that he disliked her, but judging from the surly look upon his handsome face, he had quickly remembered.

"Write out a list of requirements for my mother," Liscarroll suggested dryly, after a pause, "I am certain that she will be able to provide you with the names of a dozen older men, who might meet your needs. Though, as I have said, all that I require from your suitor is a pulse, which they will still possess, even if they do have one foot in the grave."

He cast her a lazy, self-satisfied smile which set Emma's teeth on edge. Oh, he was so pompous, so smug, and it was made all the worse because he was so terribly handsome. If he had not been the Duke of Liscarroll, Emma would readily have admitted to his beauty; as it was, she took pains to find imperfections in his appearance. His nose was, perhaps, a tad too long, and his dark hair, most unfashionable in its length. Even his figure, clad in riding coat and buckskin breeches, was too muscular to be considered aristocratic. If he wasn't a Duke, he might pass for a farm labourer, she thought with a sniff.

"I shouldn't want a suitor that is too old, though, your Grace," Emma retorted innocently, as she set her cup down, determined to unsettle him. "Perhaps, a man a good decade younger than you, might

suit best."

"A decade?" Liscarroll looked highly affronted at the suggestion. "What age do you take me for, woman?"

"Forty, perhaps?" Emma suggested lightly, thoroughly enjoying riling the man. Liscarroll's brows knitted together in a frown so deep that it took all her resolved not to flinch.

"What?" he growled, throwing his bread roll on his plate in disgust.

"Forty," Emma replied loudly, enunciating her words and raising her voice slightly. "Oh, dear, your Grace. Is your hearing going? It's to be expected, I suppose, in a man of advancing years."

"My hearing? Why I—I—I—"

"I think what you are going to say, is that you are finished breakfast," the Dowager Duchess finished for her son, as she glided into the room serenely. "And that you are going to take yourself out for a ride, lest you find yourself at home when Emma's visitors call."

"Now I am being ejected from my own home?" the Duke demanded, crossing his arms across his chest.

"No," Georgette gave a pained sigh. "I am suggesting that you leave, to spare yourself the torture of having to make small talk with the people who are bound to call on Emma. If you would like to stay, you are most welcome; though I rather think you may be slightly out of your depth when it comes to feigning interest in the weather, or the latest scandal."

Emma watched as Liscarroll, clearly in a huff, stood to leave. His handsome face was drawn into a scowl, which would have been petrifying if it were not for his mother's own expression of mirth.

"I have business to attend to," Liscarroll said stiffly, not looking either lady in the eye. "I must write to invite Arnold Humphrey to visit so that he can inspect the Chaucer manuscript."

The last words were delivered with a pointed stare at Emma, who struggled to maintain her composure. The thought of the manuscript now belonging to the Duke still galled her, but her annoyance stemmed more from a sense of proprietary than attachment. Twice, after he had bankrupted her father, the Duke had made enquiries into buying the manuscript, and twice her father had rejected his offer. Never mind that his estates had fallen into disrepair, or that most of the servants had vanished; Lord Percival's stubborn pride would not allow him to show any weakness to the Duke, and stubborn pride was a trait that Emma shared with her late father.

"Oh, dear," Georgette said, as Liscarroll stormed out of the room. "He's rather upset."

"I am sorry," Emma offered, worried more that she had upset her hostess, than her son.

"No, don't be," Georgette gave a smile, "It's rather nice to see him expressing any emotion—he always presents such a jaded, disinterested facade to the world."

Georgette quickly changed the subject, to matters of modistes and lady's maids. A French girl had been found, courtesy of Madame Lloris, who would attend to Emma whilst she stayed in Liscarroll House. Georgette's grand plans, whilst sounding wonderful to Emma's ears, also seemed rather expensive.

"Your Grace," she finally stammered, as Georgette finished describing the gown she envisaged Emma wearing for her next ball. "It does sound beautiful, but I fear that my means, such as they are, may not stretch to another ball gown."

"Your means?" Georgette queried, "My dear, you don't think that I would expect you to finance all of this, do you? All bills will be sent to my son, for he is your guardian and it is his responsibility to see that you are fed and clothed."

Emma's eyebrows drew together incredulously at her words; Liscarroll's idea of feeding and clothing his "ward", probably stretched to dry crusts of bread and some dirty rags. She imagined his reaction to the bill that Madam Lloris would send and felt prickles of nervousness at how he might react.

"You must not worry about expense," Georgette said, sensing Emma's apprehension. "Peter is one of England's wealthiest men; a few dresses are not likely to bankrupt him. Besides, as disagreeable as you may find him, he is very generous and not one to shirk his obligations."

"I do not find him disagreeable," Emma protested weakly.

"Really?" Georgette raised her eyebrows, before taking a sip of her chocolate. "Then he's obviously not trying hard enough, for he does take a perverse pleasure in being viewed as cantankerous. I must tell him to up his game. Now, if you are quite finished, you will find Anouk waiting for you upstairs. She will be able to help you with that —that—"

Georgette was apparently lost for words as to how to describe the cap upon Emma's head, and she merely waved a hand at it in despair, visibly suppressing a shudder.

"My cap?" Emma replied with confusion, "What's wrong with my cap?"

"Everything," Georgette said firmly. "Now go upstairs and dress."

As she sat in the drawing room of Liscarroll House, Emma felt a little like a chicken that had been stuffed and basted. Anouk, the

lady's maid hired by Georgette, had arrived with a chest full of potions, which she had liberally applied to Emma's face. After slathering Price and Gosnell's Patent Naples Cream onto her cheeks, Anouk had then coated Emma's face with a liberal amount of Olympian Dew to protect her skin, and then the rest of her body with beautifying creams, salves and scented waters. It was a wonder she didn't slide off the sofa, Emma thought mutinously.

Even Emma could admit that the French girl was a *tour de force*, having styled her hair beautifully and dressed her in a simple, but becoming, day dress. Despite her apparent skill, Anouk's manner left a lot to be desired.

"Ve vill need to lay ze raw veal on your cheeks, to fix your 'orrible complexion," Anouk had said grimly, once she had finished and was surveying Emma's appearance.

"Pardon?" Emma had replied with confusion, "I think I misheard; did you say that you want to lay veal on my face?"

"Oui," the French girl had rolled her eyes, before elaborating in a loud, slow voice that could broker no misunderstanding. "For. Your. 'Orrible. Complexion. *Comprendez-vous?*"

"Yes," slightly taken aback, Emma had nodded her understanding and fled her dressing room to the sanctuary of the drawing room.

Now, as she sat waiting for the callers that Georgette was adamant would soon descend, she felt sticky, irritable, and kept checking her reflection anxiously in the silverware. She was not in any way vain, but she had always thought she had a rather nice complexion, given her fondness for fresh, country air and exercise. There was no need to sacrifice a calf on her behalf, she thought churlishly.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the butler, who gave a discreet cough to announce his presence to the two ladies.

"A Lord Neville to see Lady Percival," the butler said, almost apologetically, to Georgette.

"Send him in, Williams," Georgette said airly, obviously not as affected by the announcement as Emma, whose heart had begun to pound with nerves.

What am I doing, she thought with despair; the thought of searching for a husband was perfectly fine when it was an abstract idea, but now, that a man was calling on her, it felt all too real. How was she supposed to decide if she wanted to spend the rest of her life with a man when she would only have a few, restricted moments to speak with him? A husband would share her life, share her bed, and father her children; the idea that such an important person could be chosen over a cup of tea in a drawing room left her almost hysterical.

Luckily, as Lord Neville bounded into the room like an eager

puppy, Emma felt her nerves fade. She had no reason to be frightened of this poor boy, with his round cheeks and innocent, hopeful eyes.

"My Lady," Lord Neville said, so excited that he forgot he should address Georgette first. "How spiffing to see you again."

"And you, Lord Neville," Emma replied, biting back a smile. It was quite nice, to have someone so obviously happy to see her. He reminded her a little of Bess, a spaniel her father had owned. Standing before her now, beaming with delight, Emma could almost picture Lord Neville with a wagging tail.

The Viscount sat down in the seat that Georgette, who looked terribly amused, gestured to, and began to regale both ladies with the news of the day. From the newest variety of sort in Friboug and Treyer's, to a hunter he intended to buy in Tattersal's, Lord Neville's conversation flowed smoothly, charmingly, and—apparently—without any break whatsoever.

When Lord Neville had quite finished speaking, a good twenty minutes later, and had stood to leave, Emma had to stifle a sigh of relief. She had never met a more verbose man in her life, though it was, she conceded, far easier than having to endure awkward, stilted conversation.

"I say," Lord Neville said, by way of goodbye, "It was simply splendid to meet and talk with you again, my Lady. Perhaps, we shall ride together one afternoon in Hyde Park?"

"That sounds lovely," Emma replied faintly, only allowing her expression to change to one of horror as the door clicked shut behind the talkative Viscount.

"Goodness," Georgette waved her fan in front of her face, "Is that what young men are like these days? I thought he'd never stop talking."

"As did I," Emma replied with a weak smile. "Imagine a lifetime of being his wife."

"You'd have to stuff your ears with goose fat," Georgette said sagely "Though, with twenty-thousand a year, he could well afford to buy his wife enough of the stuff. We shall put dear Lord Neville on the maybe list."

Emma was about to protest, but before she could, Williams entered announcing another caller; Bertram Heyer, a wealthy industrialist. And so, the morning continued, with Emma and Georgette entertaining no less than five suitors until at last it was three o'clock, and no one else was expected to call.

"Well, that went well," Georgette said happily, as the clock upon the mantelpiece struck the hour. She set down the embroidery that she had been working on and gave Emma a proud smile. "You did very well, my dear. Five suitors is nothing to be sniffed at. We shall

see how matters progress over the course of the season, and by summer I fully expect you shall have no less than three proposals."

This statement should have brought a modicum of happiness, but Emma instead found herself plucking nervously at the material of her dress as she considered the prospect. Of all the men who had called, she could not imagine herself married to any of them.

"What is it, child?" Georgette asked, sensing her agitation.

"I am worried that I may make the wrong decision," Emma confessed, her turbulent feelings spilling forth. "What if I choose a man that I later find I cannot love?"

"Ah, love, that old chestnut." Georgette heaved a sigh. "I had forgotten that your generation wants romance. In my day, we simply married the man our parents picked for us."

"Did you not mind?" Emma asked curiously; she could not imagine taking a complete stranger as a husband.

"I did not know any better," Georgette looked wistfully into the distance. "And over time, I learned to love my husband."

The Dowager Duchess paused, and Emma watched as a thousand emotions danced across her face, before she sat up straight and gave Emma a bright smile.

"Besides, if I had not married Liscarroll, I would not have Peter," she added brightly, "And despite his grumpy facade, he truly is the light of my life."

"Mother!"

From outside the door, in the entrance hall, came the sound of the light of Georgette's life, and judging by the irritated tone, he was not happy. Liscarroll came stomping into the drawing room, waving a card in his hand, his face a mask of fury.

"Do you want to tell me what this is, Mother?" he asked as he angrily waved what looked to Emma to be a calling card in the air.

"Even if I did want to, I couldn't, with you waving it about like a maniac," Georgette replied mildly. "Though, it looks to me like it might be a calling card."

"That's exactly what it is," the Duke snapped in reply, throwing an icy glare at Emma. "It seems Lord Sandby has taken an interest in my ward."

"Is that so?" Georgette gave a nonchalant shrug, "Then he may take his place in the queue with the other men, dear."

Emma watched the exchange between mother and son curiously. She had no idea why the Duke had taken such offence to finding Lord Sandby's card, but he was livid. The Earl of Ludgate, who had not asked to be received like her other callers, was legendary amongst the ton for his suave charm and handsome good looks. He was a rakehell of the highest calibre, and his calling on Emma must have been

designed to elicit an angry reaction from the Duke, for there was no way that a committed bachelor such as Ludgate had any wish to court Emma—let alone marry her.

"I forbid Emma from entertaining that man," the Duke finished churlishly, with a dark scowl to Emma. Despite her initial misgivings as to Lord Sandby's intentions, Emma felt herself bristle with irritation at the Duke's high-handed tone.

"You cannot forbid me to do anything, your Grace," she said, squaring her shoulders defiantly. His domineering manner jarred her so much that she made a silent vow to spend as much time with Lord Sandby as was socially permissible. I may even marry the ruddy man, just to spite Liscarroll, she thought defiantly.

"I think you'll find," Liscarroll replied in a low, dangerous voice, "That as your guardian, I can command you to do whatever I please. You will not spend one second in that man's company, and that's that."

With a sweeping disdainful gaze to both Emma and his mother, the Duke swept from the room, banging the door behind him so loudly that it rattled on its hinges.

"Oh, dear," Emma sighed, casting a worried look at Georgette. To her surprise, the Dowager Duchess did not seem in the slightest bit bothered by her son's outburst.

"As I have said," Georgette explained in answer to Emma's questioning look. "I find it heartening to see Peter showing any emotions when he has spent thirty-odd years pretending he has none. Now, go and ready yourself; for you, I, and Anouk are going to spend the rest of the afternoon with Madame Lloris."

"Wonderful," Emma replied through gritted teeth; just what she needed after an altercation with the Duke, an afternoon with Anouk.

#

Chapter Five

There was nothing like a good ride to blast away the cobwebs, Peter thought with satisfaction, as he slowed his stallion to a gentle canter.

Hyde Park was near deserted at this early hour, and save Lord Amberford's panting, as he too slowed his horse's speed to canter alongside the Duke, the park was blissfully quiet.

"I can't say I like rising at such an ungodly hour," Amberford commented, as the pair made in the direction of Grosvenor-gate. "Though I do like giving old Hercules a proper run."

Riding, whilst not prohibited in the Park, was greatly encumbered during the day by the hundreds of riders, carriages and walkers who strolled its paths. Peter far preferred rising early and giving his own stallion, Hermes, a chance to gallop before the masses descended.

"How goes it with the lovely Lady Emma?" Amberford enquired innocently, breaking through Peter's thoughts.

"Pfft," Peter responded, unable to put into words, just how badly the whole affair was going. He had not thought, when he had reluctantly agreed to take in Lady Emma, that he would be forced to spend so much time with the girl. He also had not thought that a part of him, a part he valiantly tried to suffocate, would be so thrilled by each of their encounters. There was something about Lady Emma that drew him to her, like a moth to a flame. It wasn't just her beauty, which was becoming more evident every time he saw her, but her spirit. She was feisty, sharp-tongued and utterly disagreeable; traits he had never encountered in women, for most women were blinded by his title. It was quite refreshing, if not irritating, to find himself so attracted to a woman despite his best efforts not to be. Her presence in his home for the past fortnight had left him grumpy, irritable and sleep deprived from endless nights of envisioning all that he would like to do to her.

"The word in White's is that a few young bucks have already staked a claim," Amberford continued, not at all deterred by Peter's scowls.

"And who is the favourite thus far?" Peter asked, not wishing to encourage Amberford, but curious as to who the gossips thought might win Lady Emma's hand.

"Well, Lord Neville is the front-runner," Amberford offered, glancing with amusement at Peter. "They were seen out for a drive together on the Row, just yesterday."

Had Emma really gone for a drive with Lord Neville? Peter sat up straighter in his saddle; his mother had not told him about this development. As Emma's guardian, he had every right to know who it was she was fraternising with, he thought churlishly, ignoring the mocking voice in his head which teased him that he was simply jealous.

"He's too young," Peter observed, in what he hoped was an off-hand manner. "It's just a puppy like infatuation that she's indulging."

"If you say so..."

Peter bit back a sharp retort; if there was one person who knew how to rub him up the wrong way, it was Amberford. They had been friends since Eton and for two decades had shared every kind of adventure available to a man of means in London. As such, the

Marquess could—unfortunately—read Peter like a book.

"Then there's Lord Sandby," Amberford continued, not even trying to hide his amusement at Peter's annoyance. "I have it on good authority that he danced twice with her at Lady Sotheby's ball."

"Well, you can cross him off the list," Peter said with a scowl. "All Sandby is doing is trying to annoy me. He's had a bee in his bonnet since he lost Hermes to me in a game of cards; I think you'll find his interests are vested at best."

"He does seem rather intent on vexing you," Amberford agreed thoughtfully. "From luring away the lovely Lady Thornton, to attempting to steal your ward from under your nose. What did you do to the poor chap?"

"*I* didn't do anything," Peter replied shortly. "He's just a sore loser. He near accused me of cheating at cards that night; he's lucky I didn't call him out for it."

The Earl of Ludgate's reputation as a rakehell was only equalled by his reputation as a gambler. Over the years, Peter had witnessed the man lose thousands at the roll of a dice or turn of a card; for, despite his fondness for cards and games of chance, Lord Sandby had never actually acquired any skill. The night that Peter had won Hermes from Sandby, he had also won one of the Earl's smaller estates, in Devonshire. To say the man had been enraged would have been an understatement; he had been apoplectic with fury.

"Well, don't let him turn Lady Emma's head, if he's such a bad sport," Amberford advised sagely. "She seems a nice girl; she doesn't need a husband like Lord Sandby. Speak of the devil—is that him?"

Peter looked up, glancing in the direction in which Amberford had pointed. It was indeed Lord Sandby that he had spotted, riding a beast of a horse alongside a groomsman. The Earl, perhaps sensing he was being watched, looked up. For a brief second, his eyes locked with Peter's, then before the Duke knew it, the Earl was bearing down upon him, his beast of a horse galloping madly along the narrow path.

"Look out, Liscarroll," Amberford roared, as he urged his own horse out of Sandby's path. Peter had but a second to react, digging his heels into Hermes' flanks as he held his reins taut. His actions, luckily, took him out of harm's way, but unluckily, he ended up in one of the rose bushes which lined the path.

"Good God, the man's insane," Amberford observed, as the apologetic looking groomsman cantered past them after his master. "He meant to do you an injury."

"The only injury is to my coat," Peter replied, as he plucked a thorny branch from his sleeve. "And I don't believe that Sandby meant me harm, I think he simply wished to make me look the fool."

He had succeeded, Peter lamented, as he brushed prickly green

leaves from his hair. A small part of him was slightly rattled by what had transpired, though of course he kept a stiff upper lip in front of Amberford. Was Lord Sandby so disgruntled by the loss of his estate that he would harm him?

The two men parted at Grosvenor-gate, and Peter rode back to St James' Square deep in thought. He had many enemies; it was only natural when one was so heavily involved in the world of finance, but as far as he knew none had wished to harm him. True, he would admit, that many probably wished him to the devil, but none so far had attempted an assault on his person.

It was just horse-play on Sandby's part, Peter decided as he dismounted Hermes and handed the reins to the waiting groom. Though, try as he might, Peter could not shake the feeling of apprehension.

Business was a wonderful distraction, Peter thought later that afternoon, as he made his way to his library. He had spent most of the day in the offices of Drummond and Co., on Fleet Street; the bank of which he was the primary owner. Investing and lending had been the topics of the day, and Peter had decided, despite much objection from the bank's manager, to both lend and invest in a consortium who intended to build a railway line for locomotive steam engines.

"I can't see this type of thing taking off," Bates, the bank manager, had said with a sigh after the men from Stockton and Darlington had left.

Peter had simply smiled; steam powered trains were the future, and he had no intention of being left behind.

In light of such a successful day, he decided a snifter of brandy was in order. Liscarroll House seemed mercifully empty, and Peter intended to capitalise on that by having a quiet drink and a rather smelly cheroot. He made his way to the library, humming under his breath, and pushed the door open.

"Dash it, can a man get any peace in his own home?" he grumbled, as he spotted Lady Emma seated upon one of the room's leather Chesterfields. In truth, he was quite pleased to see her, especially to see her looking so becoming. She sat curled up on the couch, with her legs tucked under her, and on the ground, Peter spotted a pair of discarded slippers. Never, in all his years, had he found the sight of discarded footwear so alluring. He cleared his throat, which had suddenly gone very dry and gave Lady Emma a stern look. A stern look which soon disappeared, as he realised she had been crying.

"Are you alright?" he asked gruffly, crossing the floor in three

long strides. Despite his initial feeling of horror at finding a crying woman in his library, something compelled him toward her. He was filled with a strange urge, an urge to comfort; it was such a foreign experience that he almost resisted his impulse to help, but his conscience overruled his cowardly brain.

"Are you ill?" Peter continued, a little worried that she may have a chill or a fever. "Was it something you ate? I can have one of the footmen fetch a bucket if you feel you need to cast up your accounts."

"Goodness, your Grace," Emma replied with a watery smile. "I thank you for your concern, but I am not ill, and I am most definitely not going to cast up my accounts into a bucket."

"Better in a bucket than on the rug," Peter retorted, though he was glad to see she was still her sparky self, despite her tears. "Well, if you're not ill, then what is it?"

Like most men who are confronted by a problem, Peter's first reaction was to fix it, and fix it fast. If Lady Emma was crying there was surely a reason for her tears, and that reason could easily be remedied with a tonic or a nostrum if she were ill, or a shiny bauble from the jewellers if she was simply having a feminine moment.

"I miss my father," Lady Emma confessed with a hiccoughing sob, as she descended into a fit of weeping that shook her slight frame.

Lud. Peter tugged at the cravat around his neck; grief was not a problem that could be solved with a tincture of laudanum, nor an ice from Gunter's. He gave himself a moment to rue having opened his mouth, before perching awkwardly on the edge of the Chesterfield beside Emma and placing a consoling hand upon her shoulder.

"I was rather hoping you had a toothache," he said gruffly, unused to offering words of comfort. "It would be far easier if you did."

"I'm sorry for being an inconvenience," Emma replied dryly, as she wiped the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand.

Dash it, Peter thought with alarm, as she made to stand, that was only his opening line. She couldn't think him so hard hearted as to complain that her grief was an inconvenience, could she?

"That's not what I meant," Peter responded, his hand now drawing soothing circles upon her back as well as anchoring her to the sofa. "What I wanted to say is that I have no cure for your grief, so I can only offer you words of encouragement and empathy. It is awful to lose a loved one, and while it does not get better *per se*, it does get easier. I assure you."

"Really?" Emma looked up at him, her red-rimmed eyes now a shocking blue.

"Yes," Peter removed his hand from her back and took her own hand in his, offering it a squeeze. "There will always be moments that

are worse; Christmas, celebrations, moments when you hear a particularly funny joke you know he'd like..."

He trailed off, wondering if he perhaps, to illustrate his point, he should share the ribald limerick he had heard in White's, which his father would have loved. He glanced again at Lady Emma, who was softly patting her eyes with a handkerchief, and decided that now might not be the best time. She looked up at him, her eyelashes still damp from tears, and gave a soft smile.

"Thank you, your Grace," she said, tucking the handkerchief up her sleeve. "You have been so kind, when really you should have berated me for intruding in your library."

"This is your home, for now," Peter replied, ignoring the fact that that had been his first reaction when he had sighted her. "You are free to come and go as you please."

"Thank you."

Peter did not know what compelled him, but he leaned forward and tucked a strand of Emma's hair, which was hanging loose, behind her ear. It was far too familiar an action, for her posture stiffened, and the easy spell which was cast between them broke in that instant. Peter stifled a curse; what had he been thinking? Irritation surged through his body as he realised that he hadn't been thinking at all. He had acted on impulse, which was reprehensible for a man who prided himself upon always being composed.

"Well, you'd best dress for dinner," Peter said, well aware that his tone was more high-handed than usual. He was compensating for his uncontrolled action by acting in a most controlled manner. It came as no surprise to find that familiar glint of annoyance in Lady Emma's eyes.

"Dinner is not for another three hours, your Grace," she snipped as she stood, slipping her feet quickly into the slippers which were discarded on the floor. So quickly, that Peter, charlatan that he was, did not even have a chance to glimpse her stockinged feet. "Though I can take a hint. I thank you for your kindness just now, I shan't intrude upon it again."

Dash it. Peter swallowed a sigh; why was it that every thing he did was the wrong thing when it came to Lady Emma? Irritated and annoyed by the outcome of what had been a tender moment between them, Peter called churlishly after her.

"The library shall be off limits from tomorrow, I have a man down from Oxford to examine my manuscripts."

The only reply to his childish outburst, was a soft click as Emma gently, and pointedly, closed the door behind her. Peter sighed; the brandy and cheroot he had so been looking forward to would now act as a consolation rather than a celebration.

#

Chapter Six

The interior of Rundell and Bridge was disappointingly plain to Emma's eyes. She had imagined that the famed jewellers would resemble an Aladdin's cave of treasures and was slightly put out to find it so simple, with just a few glass cabinets displaying their wares.

Emma, who had brought Sally with her for the sojourn, idled by one particular cabinet as the gentleman at the counter spoke with a customer. She had a rather large bonnet upon her head, which she had donned in an attempt to disguise herself, for she was not here to buy, she was here to pawn. She affected a great interest in the silver service within the cabinet, only lifting her eyes when she heard the bell above the door jingle merrily, as the other customer left.

"Can I help you at all, Madame?" the gentleman, who Emma assumed was either Mr Rundell or Mr Bridge, asked politely. Emma suspected, from the kindness in his eyes, that he knew exactly why she was there.

"I have something which I would like to sell," Emma answered, a blush staining her cheeks.

Oh, she had known poverty after the Duke had bankrupted her father, but she had never stooped so low as to pawn anything; it was all highly embarrassing. It was just that now it was necessitated; for despite having all her clothes, food and daily needs looked after by the Duke of Liscarroll, Emma was without actual coin. Her father had always provided her with pin money, for the circulating libraries, ribbons, and whatever small items might take her fancy. The idea of having to ask Liscarroll for coins for her purse, horrified Emma, and so—after asking Sally's advice—she had come to the shop on Ludgate Street to pawn her mother's necklace.

"Of course," the gentleman gave a bow. "Would you perhaps care to follow me into my office? It's a tad more private."

Emma nodded and followed the gentleman, who introduced himself as Mr John Bridge, into a comfortably appointed office at the back of the shop. She took a seat opposite his desk and waited patiently as he examined the small, gold locket which had once belonged to her mother. She wished she had something else to pawn, for its sentimental value was enormous, but alas, all of the jewels belonging to the estate—which had not been entailed—had long ago been sold.

"It's a lovely piece," Mr Bridge offered, before naming a price, which was far more generous than Emma had expected.

After the formalities of paper signing and the exchange of coin had taken place, Emma cleared her throat nervously.

"If," she ventured, "My circumstances are to change, would the locket be available for repurchase?"

"Of course," Mr Bridge replied solemnly, his eyes crinkling in the corners as he gave a kind smile.

Bolstered by this piece of news, Emma thanked the jeweller and bade Sally to follow her outside to Ludgate Street, where their coach was waiting.

"Thank you, Sally," Emma said, once the pair were inside and safely out of earshot of anyone inclined to listen. "I can't thank you enough for this, and I know that you won't tell a soul."

"Wouldn't dream of it, my Lady," Sally responded with a grin. Despite the furtiveness which surrounded their outing, Emma knew that Sally was excited to be out and about. Emma had begged the housekeeper to loan her Sally for the afternoon, under the pretence that Anouk had taken ill. In truth, it was Emma who had felt ill at the thought of bringing the disagreeable French girl on such a humiliating outing, but luckily Mrs Allen had not questioned her, and had released the chamber maid for the day.

"Are we going home, my Lady?" Sally asked, as the carriage made its way through the busy London traffic.

"No," Emma shook her head and smiled mysteriously, "We are going to The Temple of the Muses."

Lackington, Allen, and Co., also called The Temple of the Muses, was a bookshop and circulating library located on the corner of Finsbury Square. The library was housed in a large building, with a grand, imposing front and a domed roof. Its exterior, whilst impressive, was nothing compared to its labyrinth like interior. Once inside, Emma took delight in Sally's unabashed reaction to its grandness..

"Lud," Sally breathed, staring in awe at the galleried dome above the counter.

Hundreds upon thousands of leather bound books lined the shelves, and the shop was brimming with an assortment of customers. Clergymen, finely dressed ladies, and dandies of the highest order wandered the vast floor.

"I bet you could drive a carriage and five through here," Sally observed in a whisper, as she followed Emma toward the sweeping staircase which led to the lounging rooms. Here, in the circled galleries, patrons could leaf through their books in peace and quiet.

Emma bypassed these rooms and led Sally up another flight of stairs, and then another, until they reached the upper floors, where the less grand books were shelved. Emma perused the shelves, trailing a finger along the spines of the books as she read their titles. She would not find any of the newer novels here, but perhaps she might

find a Gothic tale that she had not already read. Her father, who had adored literature, had been disdainful of her interest in sensational stories about haunted castles, villains, and the supernatural, but, try as she might, Emma could not resist their lure.

"This one looks interesting," she said, picking up a rather frayed volume. She bade Sally to follow her down the stairs, and the two women took a seat in one of the empty galleries.

"Shall I begin?" Emma asked, and with a nod of encouragement from Sally, she began to read aloud from the pages.

It was rather fun to read to Sally, who hung on Emma's every word as she began the story. It was also a wonderful distraction from her own thoughts, which were quite topsy-turvy after the previous afternoon's encounter with the Duke. He had been so kind, if a little awkward, and for a moment Emma had been considering revising her opinion of him, until he had reached out and tucked her hair behind her ear. Such a small act, but it had caused such inner tumult. She had stiffened at his contact, her breath caught in her throat as her stomach turned light with nerves. No man had ever touched her like that, or elicited such a visceral reaction from her body; it had left her feeling frightened, nervous and terribly excited.

Dash him, she thought irritably as she continued to read, he is so disagreeable that he even makes my reaction to him contradictory. It was just like him to be so irritating, she decided, as she came to the end of the chapter.

Emma began to read in a low, menacing voice, as the chapter reached its dramatic climax. Really, she was quite the actress she thought happily, as she noted Sally's pale face and open mouth. It was only when she realised that Sally's eyes were fixed on a point behind Emma's shoulder, that she understood that it was not her acting skills which had so frightened the chamber maid.

"Do continue," the Duke of Liscarroll said in a mocking tone, his sinfully beautiful lips twitching with amusement. "I do so enjoy a sordid tale of murder."

Before Emma could react, he had strode toward her and plucked the book from her hands, one thick, black eyebrow raised.

"Horrid Mysteries," he read aloud, "By the Marquis de Grosse, no less. Well, one can always count on the German's to raise the bar for literary standards."

"It's amusing, that is all." Emma huffed, her cheeks stained with embarrassment at his mocking tone, and shame that he had caught her reading—nay, acting—such a sensationalist tale aloud. "There is nothing wrong with seeking a little amusement, is there?"

"Well, there is when you seek to find your amusements alone and unchaperoned. Anything could have happened to you, Lady Emma."

There was an angry glint in the Duke's eye as he scowled down at her. If Emma had not known any better, she would have said he was being protective, but she did know better. He was just being high-handed for the sake of it; it had nothing to do with concern for her safety.

"Yes, I imagine there are all sorts of dangers to be found in a bookstore, your Grace," Emma replied, her tone dripping with sarcasm. "I might do myself an injury whilst reading. Heavens, why did I not think of how fatal a paper-cut might be."

"That's quite enough."

The Duke's low, calm tone halted Emma and she fell silent. In truth, Liscarroll's tightly controlled demeanour was more frightening than if he had simply given into his rage and shouted at her.

"Downstairs. Now."

Liscarroll turned on the heel of his Hessian, and Sally scrambled after him. Heaving a sigh, Emma followed suit, traipsing down the staircase after the angry Duke and the chambermaid. Once they were outside, the Duke motioned for Sally and Emma to climb into the carriage which was waiting for them.

"If I ever find you traipsing around London by yourself," Liscarroll whispered, as he helped Emma alight the step of the carriage. "I will not afford you the courtesy of a carriage ride home. I will throw you over my shoulder and march you through the streets of London if this happens again, Lady Emma. Do you understand?"

"I do," she whispered quietly in reply.

What she could not understand, she thought with despair, was why the idea of the Duke throwing her over his shoulder, had left her feeling so breathless.

I detest that man, she thought, as the Duke closed the door of the carriage and disappeared from view.

Emma did not have much time to muse on her altercation with the Duke, for the moment she returned, Georgette announced that they would soon leave again for another carriage ride with Lord Neville.

"The boy wishes to take you for a ride along the Row at five o'clock," Georgette said with a gleam in her eye, "He wants to be seen to be seen with you Emma, how exciting! Now, upstairs and change. Something bright, so that you draw the eye in the cavalcade."

Emma stifled a sigh; the last thing that she wanted to do was parade herself along Rotten Row with Lord Neville. The young Viscount had danced attendance upon her for the past fortnight; he had asked her to dance at every ball, had already taken her out for a ride in his barcouche, and had even declared that he would hold a

weekend party on his Essex estate, simply for the pleasure of showing her the gardens. It was all very encouraging, from a matrimonial perspective, but alas, Emma could not feel any romantic inclinations toward the young man—no matter how hard she tried.

Really, she thought, as she traipsed up the stairs to her bedchamber, Lord Neville is my greatest prospect for a husband. The other suitors who had called upon her at the beginning, had dwindled away as the season progressed. Apart that is, from Lord Sandby, though Emma could no more bring herself to like him than she could a weasel. True, he was terribly handsome, but there was something rather off about the Earl, whose smile never quite reached his eyes.

"Anouk," Emma called, as entered her room. She was having a devil of a time trying to unbutton her gloves, and so she made her way into the small room, off her dressing room, where the Lady's Maid could usually be found.

"Oh," Emma pushed the door open, surprised to find that Anouk was not seated in her armchair as she usually was. A pile of stockings that needed darning sat untended in a basket beside the chair.

Drat her, Emma thought in annoyance; the surly French girl could be counted upon to be nearby when Emma least wanted her company, but when she actually needed her, she had vanished.

Rolling her eyes, Emma set about preparing her own toilette. She had just finished dressing into a green, velvet riding dress, when Anouk appeared, tutting in disapproval.

"Not zat," Anouk said with a sigh, "Ze blue one, green is too dark for an evening ride. You should 'ave called me before you decided to dress."

"I did," Emma replied, exasperated at being scolded when she had done nothing wrong.

"Well I would 'ave heard you if you had," Anouk replied, with the air of a suffering martyr. "For I was just in my room, darning your stockings."

Emma was about to reply that she most certainly had not been in her room, but she hesitated. She had no idea why Anouk would lie about something like that, and she also did not have the time to argue with the French girl over such a trivial matter.

"The blue it is," Emma eventually replied, "It shall look lovely with my new hat—the one with the blue ribbon trim."

"If you say so," Anouk mutter in response, disappearing to find the riding dress and leaving Emma wishing that she had called the girl out on her lie.

The sooner I am married and leave this house of bedlam the better, Emma told herself; she was thoroughly tired of Liscarroll House's disagreeable occupants.

#

Chapter Seven

Arnold Humphreys was every inch the librarian, Peter thought, as the short, balding man was led into the library by the butler. The librarian's spectacles were almost an inch thick, and magnified his eyes so much that Peter could see the faint cobwebs of veins which dotted his irises.

"Your Grace," Humphreys gave a bow as he was introduced.

The man must be nearly blind, Peter thought, for he could see that Humphreys eyes were not quite focused on him, but rather a spot over Peter's shoulder.

"Very good of you to come down," Peter offered, gesturing to one of the seats. Then he gestured again, this time more theatrically, for Humphreys still seemed lost.

"A very exciting prospect, to see an original Chaucer," Humphreys demurred the Duke's thanks graciously, once he had finally found his seat. "Amongst other things."

"Yes," Peter nodded, heartened by how excited the scholarly man appeared. "The Chaucer is the icing on the cake of the collection, though I have other things I would like you to examine. Some medieval ephemera, a few texts, and a handwritten couplet reputed to have been written by Shakespeare himself. Though I rather think it's a forgery."

"Most likely," Humphreys agreed. "Though the old forgeries are a collector's item in themselves. I must say, Your Grace, that your father was renowned for his collection of texts. I had heard of an Egyptian scroll..."

"Oh, the Papyrus of Ani," Peter gave a shiver at its mention. The ancient, illustrated piece was said to have been used by the Egyptians to perform spells and funeral rites. The thing had always given Peter an odd, morbid feeling, and so he kept it safely in a box in the library of his Sussex estate.

"It's down in Sussex," Peter said with a dismissive wave of his hand, "If you are ever down there, you are most welcome to take a look, but for now; the Chaucer."

"Yes, let's get to it," Humphreys said, rubbing his hands together brusquely.

Peter spent the morning showing the scholar the various items which needed examining, before leaving him to his devices.

He exited the library, fully intending to spend an afternoon in White's, but this thought was interrupted as he collided with Lady Emma, who had been hurrying in the direction of the kitchens.

"Ouch," Emma cried as he accidentally trod on her slippered foot

with his boot.

"My apologies," Peter said with concern. "I do hope I didn't hurt you."

"Not at all," she replied, hiding a wince as she tested her foot gingerly upon the floor. "It was an accident. Neither of us were looking where we were going."

"Where *were* you going?" Peter asked curiously, for the only destination she could have were the kitchens.

"I seem to have lost my lady's maid," Emma sighed, glancing down the hallway as if she hoped the missing maid might magically appear. "I thought perhaps she was in the kitchens, annoying the staff down there."

"Well, allow me to check for you," Peter offered, before bellowing, "Harper."

A liveried footman appeared before the Duke in an instant.

"Check the kitchens for Lady Emma's maid, please," Peter commanded, "She seems to have lost her."

Harper disappeared as quickly as he had materialised, leaving Peter alone with Emma in the corridor.

"Thank you for your help, Your Grace," his ward said with a roll of her eyes. "You've saved me, oh, at least twenty steps."

"That's what Harper's there for," Peter replied, offering her a smile. "Wouldn't want to put the lad out of a job, now would we?"

There was no time for Emma to voice what—judging by her pious expression—would have been a rather cutting retort, for Harper reappeared with news that the lady's maid was not in the kitchens.

"Lud, I wonder where she's got to now," Emma said with a sigh.

"Do you need her for anything in particular?" Peter questioned; was she perhaps going for another jaunt with Lord Neville? Or an unchaperoned trip to town, perhaps, he thought with a scowl.

"No," Emma shook her head, "I just wished to discuss with her what ballgown I will wear on Friday. Your mother is insisting that I have Madam Lloris make another one, but I have several others that will suffice."

"There's no need for penny-pinching, my Lady," Peter responded blithely, "There's quite enough in the coffers to see you suitably attired for your ball."

"Technically, it's *your* ball, your Grace," Emma replied with a light smile.

"Really though, we both know, it's my mother's." Peter responded with a grin.

His mother had been like the devil these past few days, as she had finished pulling together the last few details of the ball she was to host on Friday. Though Emma was right, in that technically Peter was

hosting the ball, all that was really required of him was to show up. The details like the food, the music, and the guests had all been decided by Georgette.

The ball was, the Dowager Duchess had informed her son, a vehicle in which they could show Emma at her brightest. The party would let the *ton* see that Emma was a part of the Brazil family now, and as such, was the star of the season.

"Have we not already done that?" Peter had grumbled.

"Yes," his mother had replied with a placating pat to his hand. "But I want to do it one last time, just in case Lord Neville needs a little reminder of what a catch Emma is. A man is more likely to propose if he thinks there are others waiting in the wings."

This remark had put Peter into a most irritable humour. He knew that he had no claim over Emma, but the idea of her marrying the puppy faced Lord Neville had sent a shot of fury through him.

Perhaps you want to marry her yourself, a voice inside his head had taunted. Peter had found it easy to silence that thought, for it was ridiculous to think that he wanted to make the daughter of his enemy his bride. Especially when it was obvious that she despised him as much as he disliked her. But now, standing in the hallway, so close to Lady Emma that he could smell the intoxicating floral scent which followed her everywhere, Peter was not so certain.

Everything about the girl, bar her lineage, was attractive; her hair, like spun gold, her lips, a perfect rosebud, and her eyes, blue as the sea...

"Are you quite all right, your Grace?"

"Yes," Peter started from his reverie, so caught up in Emma's beauty that he had quite forgotten she was actually standing before him.

"If you're sure," Emma cast him a doubtful look and made to leave.

"Well actually," Peter said, startled that she was once again about to disappear from sight. "I could rather use your help."

"Oh?"

How could one perfectly raised eyebrow be so alluring? Peter hesitated, struck dumb by the jolt of desire he felt, and the fact that he had not thought his plan through.

"I wish to purchase a gift for my mother," he said, after a long pause. "I should like a woman's eye. Perhaps you would like to accompany me to Rundell and Bridge and help me pick out a bauble?"

"No."

Emma clasped a hand over her mouth, obviously shocked at her forthright reply.

"What I mean," she said, a pink blush staining her cheeks. "Is that

it would not be seemly for me to be seen alone, with you, in a jewellers."

"I don't see the harm," Peter objected, but his ward cut him off.

"No, no, I insist," she said, most definitely. "After all, just yesterday you were so concerned about my reputation that you threatened to carry me bodily across London..."

Emma paused, and Peter watched with interest as he noted the blush which stained her cheeks now travelling down, down, down to her *décolletage*, which was most generous for such a slim woman. His eyes then made their way, slowly, back up to Emma's face, meeting her eyes which were now dark with desire.

Lud, she feels it as much as I do, Peter thought with triumph. The yearning that he felt was reflected in his ward's face. Her rosebud mouth seemed plumper and was slightly open, as though she were waiting for him to kiss her.

Of its own volition, his hand reached up, and with his thumb he gently brushed Emma's full lower lip. It was, perhaps, one of the most erotic moments of Peter's life, sullied only by the word "Feathers".

"I beg your pardon?" Peter asked, his voice ragged and harsh with desire.

"Your mother is looking for a new feather for her turban," Emma said breathlessly, looking up at him with the eyes of a frightened fawn. "Perhaps a trip to the *plumassier* would yield a more thoughtful gift, rather than another expensive bauble? Mr Bobitol in Cavendish Square has a wonderful assortment; ostrich feathers, peacock feathers..."

"A feather?" Peter gave a sigh, and as he exhaled he felt the spell break between them. "What a novel idea."

"It would save you both time and money, your Grace," Emma offered with a meek smile.

She looked weak, Peter thought, alarmed that his small action had left her in such a delicate condition.

You mindless boor, he chastised himself, she is not one of the *demimonde* to be accosted in a hallway, she is a lady. He took a step back, to allow his ward space, and as he did so he saw her visibly exhale with relief.

"Money is no object," Peter said stiffly, lifting his hands to straighten his cravat, though it was already perfectly straight. "Though you have given me a lot to think on, Lady Emma. Thank you."

On that ambiguous note, he left her, desire adding speed to his steps as he retreated.

Either my mother will have to marry Lady Emma off immediately, he thought with alarm as he fled down the hallway, or I will have to marry her myself before I completely debauch her.

Of the two scenarios, he wasn't at all surprised to find that the former was more appealing—though he was in no doubt that his ward would not feel the same way.

After a disastrous hour in Mr Bobitol's cave of feathers, ribbons and decorative paper flowers, Peter emerged empty handed and instructed his driver to take him to the Strand. Thoughtful gifts were all well and good when one was a woman and had an eye for trimmings, but as a man Peter had felt completely out of his depth. Better to head to Rundell and Bridge, where he could be assured that whatever he bought was tasteful, no matter how bad his taste.

"Your Grace," John Bridge, one of the proprietors came out from behind the counter to greet him. Peter rather preferred Bridge to his partner Rundell, who had become a little too bombastic for Peter's tastes, since the firm had created a much lauded silver plate service for state ceremonies. Commissioned on the direct request of the Prince Regent, Rundell could oft be heard mentioning to anyone who would listen.

"How may I be of service, your Grace?" Bridge asked helpfully.

"I'm looking for a present for my mother," Peter supplied as he perused the glass cabinets which lined the walls.

"Do you have anything in particular in mind? A ring, a necklace, or, perhaps, a bracelet?"

Peter wracked his brains, trying to remember what it was that he had last bought for his mother. It was a ruby ring he remembered, the size of an egg.

"A bracelet perhaps," he decided, "Nothing discreet or dainty, mind; my mother is quite the magpie. The bigger, the shiner, the better."

"As you wish, your Grace," John Bridge was practised enough to keep the smile from his face, but Peter noted that he went to fetch a tray with a notable spring in his step at the thought of a large sale.

Bridge returned with an assortment of bracelets for Peter to peruse, which he did for a few minutes before selecting one with emeralds set in gold filigree.

"An excellent choice, your Grace," Bridge said, as he began to wrap the bracelet. The man paused, as he finished tying the package with a ribbon, and gave Peter a worried look.

"Is there a problem?" Peter asked coolly; had Bridge remembered that someone else had already paid a deposit on the bracelet? If so, it was his problem; Peter had paid a small fortune over the years to the two jewellers—they could both retire on the money he had spent in their store. If anyone deserved preferential treatment, it was he.

"It's a rather delicate matter, your Grace," Bridge said hesitantly,

"Not one I'm sure I should speak of."

"Oh?" Peter raised an eyebrow.

"It concerns your ward, Lady Emma Percival."

"Anything concerning Lady Emma, also concerns me," Peter replied firmly, wondering what on earth the girl had done. Had she somehow managed to run up a bill in his name? Dresses and hats he would happily pay for, in the name of finding her a husband, but he was not about to deck the blasted girl out in diamonds before he handed her over to Lord Neville.

Not that Lord Neville will be winning her hand, he reminded himself sternly. He would exercise his right of refusal as Emma's guardian if needs be, to nip that particular romance in the bud.

"Well," Bridge looked embarrassed as he continued. "She visited yesterday looking to pawn a necklace which, though not valuable by our usual standards, seemed to hold quite a sentimental value to her."

"What on earth does she need to pawn anything for?" Peter blustered, "She has everything she needs."

"Sometimes a few coins to jingle in one's pocket makes one feel more independent," Bridge offered sagely.

This gave Peter pause for thought; he had no idea what financial state Emma had arrived to Liscarroll House in, nor had he bothered to ask. True, he had given his mother *carte blanche* to spend whatever she liked on the girl, but he had not thought of pin money.

Yesterday, when he had spotted her reading to the maid in the lounging room of The Temple, he had been struck by how carefree she had seemed. It was obvious now that the freedom she had felt was because she had coin in her purse to spend as she pleased and did not have to wait for a handout from him. A handout that had not been forthcoming.

"Blazes," Peter cursed, then apologised to the startled Bridge. What an inconsiderate fool he had been, and a tactless one at that. Why just today he had pompously told Emma that money was no object, and yet he had not seen fit to give her even a little pin money that she could spend on amusing herself. She probably thought him the worst kind of cad.

"I shall take the necklace," Peter said, "And the sapphire bracelet you showed me earlier, as well."

Hughes nodded in reply and quickly went to fetch the necklace, a gold locket, from a room in the back. As he wrapped the sapphire bracelet and placed it in a bag alongside the present for his mother, Peter examined the locket. It was a plain, gold thing; pretty but quite dated in style. On the back there was an inscription "KAR" and Peter wondered idly who the initials might have belonged to.

Emma's mother, he realised with a jolt, as he remembered the

late Countess had been Katherine. Poor Emma; to have been abandoned by her wretched cousin, only to end up in the home of an insensitive, ignorant, pompous git who had forced her into pawning her late mother's possessions.

I shall have to try harder with her, Peter resolved.

"Thank you, Bridge," Peter said, as the jeweller handed him his packages. "It's been most illuminating."

#

Chapter Eight

The day of the ball had not begun well.

Emma, who rarely slept late, had woken near noon only to find that there was something heavy and wet upon her face.

"What the—" she cried sitting up blindly. With her hands she groped at her face, which was covered with something soft, squishy, and—judging by the smell of it—bloody.

"Argh!" she had shrieked, as she ripped the offending material from her face and flung it across the room.

The meat, as she now saw it was, hit the wall opposite her bed and slid to the floor, leaving a bloody trail on the floral wallpaper in its wake.

"Non, non, non," Anouk, summoned by Emma's shouts, bustled into the room clucking in disapproval. "It is veal. It very expensive, you cannot throw it on ze floor."

"You cannot put lumps of meat on my face when I'm sleeping," Emma countered as she scrambled out of bed. The smell of the raw veal was still in her nose, and she was afraid she might retch.

"Well, when am I supposed to put it on your face, when you are sleeping all ze day?" Anouk huffed, much aggrieved by Emma's tone. The French girl glared at Emma, with her hands on her hips, an expression of great insult upon her fine-boned face.

Emma stifled a scream; Anouk truly was the most frustrating person she had ever encountered.

"You are *never* to put veal on my face," Emma retorted, marching over to her dressing table. "Not when I am asleep, not when I am awake, and most definitely not without warning me first. Do you understand?"

"Oui," Anouk muttered, visibly rolling her eyes.

The rest of the day had continued much the same, though thankfully minus the veal.

Emma had eaten a quick breakfast before returning to her room.

On Georgette's instruction she was not to leave until every inch of her had been plucked, polished and pampered by Anouk.

"We need you looking your best, dear," the Dowager Duchess had said firmly.

I shan't look my best when they find me standing over Anouk's dead body, Emma had thought mutinously, for the thought of spending the whole day with the French lady's maid already had her in a temper.

It was obvious that Anouk felt the same way, for she spent the whole afternoon sighing and glancing wistfully out the window as she tended to Emma's toilette.

"You may go," Emma said with relief, much later, when Anouk had finally finished dressing her hair, the final act in the hours of preparation. "Thank you for your help."

"Ze pleasure was all mine," Anouk replied darkly, fleeing from the room.

There was still an hour or two before anyone would begin to arrive, so Emma, conscious not to crinkle her dress or dislodge the combs from her hair, settled down in the chair by the fireplace to read. Her eyes kept drifting from the pages of the book in her hands, however, to stare blankly into the distance. Her ability to concentrate had disappeared in an instant yesterday, when the dashed Liscarroll had idly rubbed his thumb across her bottom lip.

The act had been carried out in a manner that was almost casual; only the black desire in the Duke's eyes had belied that he was affected in any way. She, sadly, had not been able to conceal her own desire, which his swift touch had elicited. She had been breathless, open-mouthed, and, she was certain, most obvious in her attraction for the dastardly Duke.

Oh, he is a dastardly wretch, Emma thought, as she flicked furiously through the pages of her novel, before reluctantly correcting herself. The Duke of Liscarroll was many things—arrogant, pompous, ridiculously high-handed—but in his dealings with her he had always been kind. It was most confusing, and incredibly frustrating.

It would be easier if he were to act like the ignorant monster I had thought he was, Emma reflected. Her mixed emotions toward Liscarroll were exhausting and frightening in equal measure. The attraction which pierced her at their every encounter was a foreign feeling she had never had to contend with before. Not once, in all her life, had she felt desire for any man. True, she had found some men handsome, but this feeling, which left her knees weak and her mind foggy, was new and petrifying.

Perhaps tonight Lord Neville will make his proposal, Emma thought hopefully; the sooner she left Liscarroll's home, the better. She

ignored the faint feeling of disquiet at the thought of becoming Lord Neville's bride, and focused her attention with more determination on the pages of her novel.

She had been rereading the same sentence for what felt like the tenth time, when there was a knock upon the door.

"Begging your pardon, my Lady," Harper, the handsome young footman said, "But his Grace has requested to see you in his library for a moment."

"What for?" Emma asked, but the young man had no answer. Of course, a footman would not question the Duke's reasons for doing anything, Emma thought with chagrin, he simply follows orders, as must I.

She made her way carefully down to the library, conscious of her dress, her hair, and the fact that she did not want to ruffle a ribbon and require Anouk's surly assistance.

"You called, your Grace?" Emma asked coolly, as she entered the library.

"I did."

Liscarroll rose from his desk as she entered the room, his eyes still upon a letter he had been writing.

"Lud," he said, as he looked at her for the first time, his face a picture of shock.

Emma did not know whether to feel gratified or annoyed by his astonished expression, but in the end she decided on the former. Anouk, though painful company, was quite the accomplished Lady's Maid if she had managed to stupefy the notorious rake.

"You look wonderful," Liscarroll continued softly, his eyes sweeping her from top to toe. "Beautiful, radiant, serene; you're like an angel before me."

"Thank you, your Grace," Emma replied, touched by the sincerity of his compliment.

There was a slight pause, in which they both looked at each other with something akin to shyness, but the moment was broken when Liscarroll awkwardly cleared his throat.

"No doubt, you'll soon shatter the angelic illusion with some of your querulous commentary," he grumbled, "If you wish Lord Neville to propose tonight, might I suggest a vow of silence for the duration of the ball?"

"It is not I who is querulous, your Grace," Emma retorted waspishly, "You cannot even give a compliment without following it immediately with an insult. It is a wonder you have lived to such a great age with so sharp a tongue."

Emma was gratified to see that her aim at the Duke's age had hit its target. Liscarroll bristled in annoyance, gifting her one of his dark,

malevolent scowls.

"Would you like to shoot me, Lady Emma?" he drawled, his blue eyed gaze amused.

"I'm certain I'm not the only person who would," Emma replied smoothly, "Though I shan't call you out tonight, your Grace. Your Mama would never forgive me if I ruined her ball."

"She would not," Liscarroll agreed, the corners of his sensuous mouth lifting into a slight grin. "And she would be most upset if you ruined your lovely dress. Now, the reason I called you here—"

Liscarroll went to the mantelpiece and retrieved a package wrapped in familiar paper. He held it out to her and Emma took it with nervous hands.

"My necklace," she cried, as she unwrapped the paper to reveal the locket she had pawned in Rundell and Bridge. She glanced at the Duke, who stood beside her, his expression closed and unsmiling.

"How did you know?" she asked hesitantly.

"As my ward, Mr Bridge felt encumbered to tell me that you had pawned an item," the Duke replied disapprovingly.

"He had no right to tell you," Emma protested, but the Duke cut her off.

"I am your guardian," he said, waving a dismissive hand. "Your business is my concern, whether you like it or not."

Emma wanted to argue that she did not like him poking his nose into her business, not one jot, but she looked at her mother's treasured necklace and kept her silence. It was a relief to have it back in her possession, for though she knew that Mr Bridge would not have sold it, she had still had her fears.

"Thank you," she said as she fingered the locket's chain, "I shall pay you back, your Grace, once I have the means."

"You most certainly will not," Liscarroll growled dangerously. "And there is no need to thank me—it was a terrible oversight on my part not to arrange pin money for you. I hope you will accept my apology and a gift to show you just how sorry I am."

Liscarroll returned to the mantelpiece to fetch another small parcel, once again wrapped in paper embossed with the name of Rundell and Bridge.

"You shouldn't have," Emma squeaked as she opened the paper to reveal a sapphire bracelet that most certainly cost a small fortune.

"I wanted to," Liscarroll replied simply, "And, if you ever again find yourself in a situation where you are required to pawn your jewels, at least you will have something of less sentimental value to offer than your mother's locket."

Oh, Emma thought blinking away tears, he was insufferable—biting one minute and kind the next. In all her life, no one had ever

done anything as kind and thoughtful for her.

"Well, thank you," Emma persisted, hoping her voice conveyed the sincerity she felt. "If I can do anything at all for you, your Grace, please let me know."

"You can take your name off the list of people wishing to shoot me," the Duke joked with a quick smile. "And you can stop with all this 'Your Grace' business. Liscarroll will suffice, or Peter if you're feeling particularly amiable towards me."

The idea of calling the formidable Duke by his given name was so alarming that Emma almost burst out laughing. "Perhaps I shall call you Sweet-Pea, as the Duchess does?" she teased.

"You can call me whatever you like, if you smile at me that way," Liscarroll replied seriously.

And there it was again, Emma thought with alarm, that strange sensation as though all the air had been sucked from the room. She stood still, paralysed by desire and the heat of his smouldering gaze.

The Duke took a step forward; a small step but one filled with intention. Emma held her breath, knowing that he was about to kiss her and then—

"Blast," Liscarroll cursed as the spell between them was broken by an urgent rap upon the door.

Emma heaved a sigh of relief mixed with disappointment as the Duke called for their intruder to enter.

"Beg your pardon, your Grace," young Harper said as he stepped into the room. "But her Grace has asked for Lady Emma."

"Of course," Emma said quickly, grateful that she could make a swift exit and that she would not be left alone again with Liscarroll. With an apologetic glance to the Duke, Emma hurried from the room, not allowing herself to think of what might have happened had Harper not interrupted them.

It seemed to Emma that the whole of London had descended on St James' Square for the Duchess's ball. The grand ballroom in Liscarroll House was packed with people, which was quite a feat, as it was rumoured to be the largest ballroom in the whole city.

Emma spied a few familiar faces amongst the glamorous guests, and she waved to and greeted acquaintances as best she could. She was much in demand for dances, a fact which Georgette approved of heartily.

"Good girl," the Dowager Duchess whispered as Emma left the floor after a particularly lively Quadrille. "The poor boy is beside himself watching you being whisked off your feet by so many eligible men."

"Who?" Emma began to ask, but she stopped when she saw that Georgette was glancing at Lord Neville. Poor Lord Neville, Emma thought with a pang of guilt, she had only had a moment to talk with him before the dancing began, and then she had clean forgot he existed until Georgette had mentioned him.

That's because your mind is filled with thoughts of a particularly dashing Duke, a voice in Emma's head taunted her. She could not deny it; she had danced at least a dozen sets, but not once had her mind been on any of her dance partners. Instead, it was Liscarroll who filled her thoughts; thoughts of both he and the kiss that might have been consumed her.

She spied him from the corner of her eye and was startled to find the Duke was watching her with a narrowed gaze. From across the room their eyes locked, and much to Emma's alarm, the Duke began to make his way over to where she and his mother stood.

"Sweet-Pea," Georgette trilled, as Liscarroll arrived at her side.

Emma hid a smile and she saw that the Duke did the same. His valet had excelled himself, she thought, for she had never seen Liscarroll look so handsome. He was dressed in a dark coat over a cream waistcoat and white shirt, which acted as a relief to his dark colouring. Liscarroll, unlike so many of the men present, was tanned by the sun and the overall effect of his dark skin against the whiteness of his collar and cravat was almost piratical.

"I wanted to steal Lady Emma for the next dance," Liscarroll said to his mother rather than to Emma herself.

She bristled at his usual high-handed manner, an act that did not go unnoticed by the Duke.

"Ah, I have annoyed you, my Lady," Liscarroll observed, his eyes dancing wickedly. "I hope not so much that you will again threaten to call me out?"

"Peter," Georgette admonished, looking left and right to make sure that no one had overheard. "What a terrible thing to say. Emma would never threaten to shoot you."

"Oh, she would and she has," the Duke replied cheerfully, "Amberford has offered to be her second if she ever feels like shooting me again. Now, if you will excuse us Mother, I will take Lady Emma for a dance before she is overcome with anymore thoughts of murder."

"Your Grace," Emma grumbled as she found herself being led across the room toward the dance floor, "That was quite uncalled for. What will your Mother think of me? Or Lord Amberford for that matter?"

"My dear Mama seems tickled pink at the idea that you have threatened me bodily harm," Liscarroll observed and, indeed, when Emma glanced over her shoulder, Georgette was wearing a broad

smile, which stretched from ear to ear.

"And Amberford," the Duke continued with a smile, "Could not believe that it had taken you so long to threaten murder. Now, enough of that; did you forget that I had asked you to call me by name?"

Emma stayed silent, she did not have the energy to argue with Liscarroll about the discomfort she felt at addressing him in such a familiar manner. Instead, she allowed him to take her hand and lead her onto the floor, only stumbling a little when she realised that the orchestra was readying to play for a waltz.

"This is nice," Liscarroll observed as together they began the first steps of the dance.

"Nice" was not a word that Emma herself would have used to describe their present situation. The Duke's hand rested lightly on her waist, but to Emma, it felt as though it was burning through the material of her dress, sending shock waves through her body. They were so close that she could see the faintest hint of dark stubble threatening on his chin and neck, and to her surprise, she was overcome with an urge to run her fingers across it.

The situation was far from nice; it was dangerous and intoxicating being so close to the Duke of Liscarroll.

"Indeed," she offered stiffly in reply, unable to form a sentence for fear he would notice how breathless she was.

"Your Lord Neville seems most put out," the Duke continued, unaware that conversation was the last thing that Emma desired. "I wonder if an engagement with a man so prone to jealousy is wise?"

Emma glanced in the direction of Lord Neville and, indeed, he looked most morose as he watched her dance with Liscarroll. She felt a pang of guilt at his maudlin expression; what type of woman was she to tempt Lord Neville into making her his bride, when at most what she felt for him was little more than mild affection?

"In fact," the Duke continued darkly, "I'm not certain that I will grant you leave to marry the boy, if he asks. You are not suited—it's quite plain to see."

"I beg your pardon?" Emma asked, her voice like ice. Any doubts she might have had about Lord Neville were quashed by Liscarroll's authoritarian declaration.

"You heard me," the Duke replied mildly, the corners of his lips tugging with amusement. "I am not certain that you and Neville are suited. As your guardian, I could not stand by and let you enter into such an unsuitable match."

"Why, you—"

Emma made to wrench her hand away from the Duke's, but he held fast, and his other hand upon her waist gripped her even more firmly, pulling her closer.

"You will not cause a scene," Liscarroll continued calmly as he led her through the final steps of the dance. "You will stay and hear me out. There are other men more suited to being your husband, Emma. Men who would fan the flames of your passion, not dampen them out forever."

"Like who?", the question was on the tip of Emma's tongue, but it died there. For she saw, in the Duke's deep, blue eyes, just whom it was that Liscarroll thought was best suited to being her husband—he himself.

The idea of the Duke leading her away from the path of gentle, controlled, matrimonial boredom toward a life ruled by ardour and passion, petrified her. She knew that her fear must have shown on her face, for the Duke gave a frown at her disagreeable response.

"You will not marry Neville," he said shortly, as the music came to an end.

He still held her close, even though the couples around them had now broken apart. His handsome face wore a look of conceited arrogance, and his commanding tone left Emma apoplectic with rage, fear, and a longing desire that she did not know how to tame.

"Oh, you are a beast," she whispered, not caring that the couples nearby could hear her and, indeed, were watching their exchange curiously. "I wish, I wish, I wish...someone would just shoot you dead."

"Careful what you wish for, my Lady," the Duke replied with a smirk, finally releasing her from his grip.

He gave her a bow and left the dance floor, leaving Emma to seek refuge from the stares of the other guests behind one of the ballroom's marble columns. In her haste to seek a hiding place, she tripped upon one of the many flounces which adorned the hem of her dress and it ripped loudly.

"Gemini," Emma hissed with annoyance as she looked at the material which now hung forlornly from her dress; she would have to find Anouk and have her mend it. She could not spend the rest of the night looking like she had been dragged through a bush, nor could she dance for she would trip and cause another scene.

"Excuse me," Emma said, as she bumped into a gentleman as she made her way through the crowded ball room.

"Not at all, my Lady," the pleasant tones of Lord Amberford replied. The young man's handsome face creased into a frown as he saw the look of distress on Emma's face.

"Is everything alright?" he asked with mild concern. "I know Liscarroll can be trying on occasion, but don't let him upset you."

"Did everyone hear our quarrel?" Emma asked with a sigh. "Oh, Lud, we shall be the talk of the ton—though it's entirely the Duke's

fault if we are. It is not that which has upset me, though, my Lord. I have torn my dress and I must find my maid and have her mend it. Please excuse me."

With a tight smile to Amberford, Emma left the confines of the warm ballroom to search for Anouk. The French girl was not in the small room beside Emma's dressing room, so Emma lifted her skirts, made her way down the hallway and climbed the two flights of stairs to the servants' quarters.

"Anouk," she called as she knocked on the door to Anouk's bed-chamber. "Are you there?"

The door, which had not been closed properly, swung open in response to Emma's rapping, revealing an empty room. Anouk was not there nor, judging by the pristine bedsheets, had she been there recently.

"Gemini," Emma rolled her eyes; trust Anouk to be missing when she needed her most. She would have to attempt to mend the flounce herself, she thought, making her way back downstairs to her dressing room. She found a needle and thread and hastily mended the flounce as best she could, though in her haste she managed to prick her finger quite deeply.

I'll just have to hope the bleeding stops, Emma thought, sucking on her bleeding thumb as she made her way back downstairs.

She had just reached the first floor corridor, when a large bang from downstairs echoed through the house, causing her to pause.

"Goodness," Emma said aloud to herself; it sounded like a gun-shot. But surely not?

#

Chapter Nine

Dash it, Peter cursed to himself as he stalked away from Emma; what was it about the girl that made him lose all sense of reason?

She had been there, in his arms, so close that he could smell her intoxicating feminine scent—and what had he done? Why, he had acted like an authoritarian bull! He had provoked her into an outburst that had stung his pride; but her sharp words were no more than he

deserved.

"What happened?" His mother materialised at his side, her face creased in a frown. "What did you do to cause such a scene?"

"Nothing," Peter replied mulishly, gesturing for a passing footman to bring him a glass of wine. He downed the thing in one gulp, but it did not have the mellowing effect he desired.

"You must have done something," his mother pressed, but Peter kept his stoic silence.

What was he supposed to tell her? That he had suggested himself as a husband to Lady Emma, only to find her so horrified by the idea that she had looked fit to faint? The memory of Emma's pale face and frightened eyes clawed at his pride and he summoned the footman again, for another glass of wine.

"You'll end up in your cups if you keep going like that," Georgette said as she observed the crowd before them.

The ball was reaching its crescendo. The room was filled to bursting point with men and women, decked out in their finery, glittering beneath the chandeliers. There were dozens of his acquaintances present and at least a hundred other people whom Peter would struggle to name. A familiar face caught his eye, and Peter saw Arabella standing by the French doors, her cat-like eyes watching him malevolently from across the room. She was soon joined by Ludgate, who bent his head to whisper something into her ear, before taking her hand and disappearing through the French doors and out into the garden.

Perhaps a week ago he would have felt a stab of jealousy or rage at his former flame behaving so scandalously under his own roof—but Peter felt nothing for Arabella. All that filled him was a yearning for the one woman he could not have.

"Well," his mother continued as she straightened her turban. "I hope that when you see Emma, you will apologise for upsetting her so. Now, if you'll excuse me, I shall have to mingle amongst your guests and calm the waters."

With a frown of annoyance to her son, Georgette left, throwing herself into the crowd with a gay smile and a bobbing plume of feathers.

Peter heaved a sigh as he watched her go, filled with a restless agitation. He knew that to properly cure what ailed him he needed a vicar, a special license and his wayward ward's acquiescence. Failing that—he needed a good, stiff drink.

I need something stronger than wine, he thought, as he tapped his leg impatiently along to the music. And, he needed to escape the curious gazes of his guests, who though not obvious in their actions, were clearly watching him surreptitiously. Society lived and breathed

scandal and it was clear that his guests were waiting for him to cause another scene that they could discuss over breakfast the next day.

Peter did not oblige them, instead he turned on the heel of his slipper, made his way from the crowded ball room to the blessed relief of the deserted entrance hall. A chill breeze blew in through the French doors at the end of the corridor and Peter could hear couples outside on the terrace, but he ignored them. He needed a moment's sanctuary and where better to find that than in the dark, masculine confines of his library?

That the library was fully stocked with every type of alcohol a man might need was merely an added bonus.

Peter closed the door behind him as he entered the library, making his way to his desk with the help of the light thrown from the low fire which burned in the grate.

"What have we here?" he mused aloud as he blindly picked up a bottle from the shelf. It was too dark to read the label, but judging by its shape, Peter guessed he was holding a bottle of brandy.

That'll do nicely, he thought, making to open the bottle but something stopped him.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up and he had the queer sensation that someone else was in the room with him. He paused, every muscle stiff with apprehension, and then he heard it.

The door of the library opened and closed, and as Peter whirred around to see who it was that had entered, he was greeted by a loud blast and then everything went black.

"Good Lord," he thought, just before something struck his head and he faded into unconsciousness, "I've been shot."

#

Chapter Ten

After all the drama of the previous night, Emma was not surprised to find that she woke late the next morning.

"Gemini," she said with a yawn to Anouk as she dressed, "It must be nearly noon."

"It is eleven," the French girl replied with a disapproving sniff to her lazy mistress.

"Where were you last night?" Emma asked as Anouk dressed her hair. "I came looking for you to fix my hem, but you were not here."

"I was asleep in my bed," Anouk lied, so baldly that a shocked Emma could not find it in herself to contradict her.

Perhaps she was meeting with one of the footmen, Emma

thought, as she made her way downstairs for breakfast. Any thoughts of Anouk's love affairs soon left her head as she entered the dining room to find the Duke already seated at the table with a large bandage upon his head.

"Your Grace," Emma gasped as she spied him. "Should you not be resting? You were shot after all."

"I was not shot," Liscarroll replied cheerfully as he tucked into a plate of eggs. "I was shot at—there's a difference, you know—and luckily whoever shot at me had a poor aim. All that struck me was some plaster from the ceiling."

"But still," Emma began to protest, but the Duke silenced her with a lazy wave of his hand.

"I am fine," he repeated, his tone a warning that he would not discuss his health any further.

Emma kept her silence and took a seat at the table, graciously accepting the hot chocolate the footman brought without having to be asked. Liscarroll House had, in a short space of time, become like her second home.

"Did the papers mention anything about last night?" Emma queried as she spied the morning's papers on the table.

"No," Liscarroll replied quickly—rather too quickly for Emma's liking.

"Surely they must have?" she probed, "For the whole of London was here last night and the guests all heard the commotion."

After the sound of the gunshot had reverberated through the house the night before, it had been quickly followed by the shouts and screams of the guests. Emma had rushed downstairs to the grand entrance hall to find a crowd of people milling about in confusion.

"Everything is perfectly fine," a white-faced Georgette had called as she emerged from the library into the hall, after a few minutes of chaos. "It seems my son caught an intruder, who attempted to shoot him but missed. He is uninjured, but alas I feel our ball has come to an end."

Gasps and whispers had filled the hall. Someone had shot at the Duke? But who?

Emma remained on the last step of the sweeping staircase, her mind numb with shock. Less than half an hour ago, she had told Liscarroll that she wanted nothing more than for someone to shoot him. Oh, how had she been so cold?

To her surprise, she found herself the object of much fascination, as the faces of the crowd turned toward where she stood and the whispers began in earnest again.

"Lady Emma," Lord Amberford said as he appeared by her side. "I'm sure you've had quite the shock—why don't you follow me into

the drawing room and I'll have one of the servants fetch you a tonic."

"What?" Emma began to protest, but she found herself led by Lord Amberford—who had an iron-like grip on her elbow—into the quiet of the front drawing room.

"What on earth happened to your dress?" he had hissed furiously, once the door had closed behind them.

"My—?"

Emma looked down and gave a groan; the pale yellow material of her dress was stained with blood from her thumb. The silk material had soaked up the blood and the stain had spread across her midriff in a most alarming manner.

"I pricked my thumb upon a needle," Emma had replied morosely, holding up her injured thumb for Lord Amberford to inspect.

"Ruddy marvellous," the young Marquess had replied with a sigh, "I can only hope that the ton believe it—for right now, I fear, they all think that you must have tried to shoot Liscarroll."

Oh dear, Emma recalled the events of last night and pushed her chocolate away from her. Did the whole of the ton think her a murderess? She glanced at the Duke, who was subtly trying to edge the papers off the table, and feared they did.

"You cannot hide it from me," Emma protested, ignoring Liscarroll's look of faux innocence. "What do they say about me?"

"Well," a look of discomfort passed over Liscarroll's handsome features. "They don't name you as the suspect exactly...but they do hint heavily."

Emma dropped her head into her hands with a groan; this was terrible! What's worse, it was all her own fault. She had lost her composure, acted in a most unladylike manner and now she must face the consequences.

"You don't suspect me, do you?" she asked, as the idea that the Duke might actually think her the perpetrator popped into her head.

"Well, you did threaten to shoot me twice yesterday," the Duke replied with a wicked grin, which turned to a deep chuckle as he noted the look of despair on Emma's face. "Though, of course, I do not think you actually attempted to follow through on your words."

"You don't?" Emma asked hopefully.

"Of course not," Liscarroll said with a smirk, "You're far too attracted to me to want to shoot me dead."

Oh, Emma started, he was so smug! The biting retort on the tip of her tongue was silenced by the unexpected arrival of Lord Amberford.

"Excuse the hour," the young Marquess said to Emma as he removed his hat.

"No need to stand on ceremony," the Duke called, gesturing for Amberford to sit. "Pull up a pew and get some sausage and eggs into you."

Lord Amberford took a seat at the table, though he refused the offer of eggs, instead opting for a cup of steaming coffee.

"Any idea of who it was who tried to shoot you?" he asked the Duke baldly as he placed his cup back upon its saucer.

Emma stiffened in her seat at the mention of last night's events. Though, the Marquess must not suspect her, if he was querying the Duke before her.

"I tried to make up a list of people who wished me dead," Liscarroll replied with a lazy grin, "But I ran out of paper before I could finish it."

Both men, much to Emma's astonishment, snorted with amusement. Honestly, they were like schoolboys!

"We must try to narrow down the suspects in some way," the Marquess mused.

"Well, the easiest way to do that is by listing who was there last night," the Duke replied. "And there are two people at the top of my list, who both disappeared from the room in the minutes before I did. They had ample opportunity to follow me and attempt to shoot me dead."

"Who?" Emma queried breathlessly, as Liscarroll finished speaking.

It was as though he had forgotten she was present, for the moment she opened her mouth, the Duke frowned and gave Lord Amberford a knowing glance.

"I shouldn't like to discuss such dark matters before a lady," Liscarroll decreed imperiously.

Emma bristled at his commanding tone; he knew that in speaking to her as though she was a delicate flower that he would annoy her—and yet he persisted!

"I rather feel you're free to discuss an event that half the *ton* think I'm implicated in," she replied tartly, crossing her arms across her chest.

"She's right, old boy." Amberford said in agreement, nodding towards the papers. "They don't mention her by name, but 'Lady E on the staircase covered in blood' could only be one person."

"I was not covered in blood," Emma cried, outraged at the scandal sheet's exaggerations. "I had a small blood stain from pricking my thumb. I must have brushed it off the material of my dress."

"And how exactly did you prick your thumb?" Liscarroll asked curiously.

"I had to mend the flounce on my dress," Emma retorted, "Which

was ripped in my haste to escape you."

"Don't you have a French girl for that sort of thing?" the Duke continued, ignoring Emma's barbed comment.

"Anouk," Emma confirmed, then paused.

"And where was Anouk?"

Well, that was the question, wasn't it? Though Emma loathed the temperamental Lady's Maid, she did not think Anouk had tried to murder the Duke of Liscarroll. The girl had probably been whispering sweet-nothings to a footman in some dark corner of the house. Besides, if Anouk was going to shoot anyone it would surely be Emma herself! Still, though she was loath to implicate Anouk, she had to tell the truth.

"Anouk was not in her room when I went looking for her," Emma confessed. "Though that doesn't mean anything—servants will take any opportunity for a break if it's presented to them."

"Indeed," was all that Liscarroll had to say in reply—though he did cast a rather meaningful glance at Amberford.

"Perhaps we should retire to White's?" the Marquess suggested. "Have a quiet word with some of the boys there, they might have an idea of who could be responsible."

No one "retired" to White's before noon; Emma knew this full well, just as she knew that the Duke and the Marquess wished to discuss last night's events out of earshot of any delicate, helpless females. She stifled a sigh of annoyance; men could be so irritating at times, no wonder they were always getting themselves shot at.

"Well don't stay on my account," she said cheerfully as Liscarroll hesitated momentarily. "Lord Neville is calling on me at half past to take me for a ride in the park."

She felt a glimmer of satisfaction as she noted that Liscarroll's eyes darkened with annoyance at the mention of the young Lord Neville's name. Feeling rather smug, Emma picked a grape up from her plate, popped it into her mouth and left the table with a cheerful wave.

He's not the only one who can be insufferably annoying, she thought with satisfaction as she returned to her rooms to change for her outing.

"I can't believe I'm out for a ride with a real-life murderess!"

"But you're not really," Emma pointed out patiently to a very excited Lord Neville later that afternoon. "Firstly, the Duke was not murdered—he's still very much alive. And secondly, it was not I who shot at him."

"Oh, I know," Lord Neville smiled boyishly at her, taking his eyes

from the road before them and causing Emma to wince with panic, "But everyone else thinks you did it, which is just as exciting as if you actually did."

Lud, Emma bit back a laugh; she had no need to fear that Lord Neville would drop her because of the rumours which now tainted her—he seemed even more enthusiastic about her than he had before.

"It is my great hope that His Grace will discover who it was that shot him—and soon," Emma continued primly, hoping to put to bed Lord Neville's silly ideas.

"How terribly exciting, a murder mystery under your very own roof."

"Er, yes..." Emma trailed off, realising that Lord Neville seemed not to understand that nobody had been murdered, nor was the roof of Liscarroll House hers.

He's a sweet, sweet boy and he would make a sweet, sweet husband, Emma intoned to herself as they continued their ride through the park. It was rather early for a drive, but judging from the incredulous, curious stares that Emma received from every person they passed, she was rather glad that Lord Neville hadn't suggested a later time for their outing.

"Today is the day the lad will propose," Georgette had whispered confidently to Emma, just before she left. But, as the drive continued with no mention or hint of matrimony, Emma was beginning to think that the Dowager Duchess was wrong. Lord Neville, though himself not overly perturbed by her rumoured murderous tendencies, had a very forthright and fussy Mama who would have warned her son against proposing marriage to a lady involved in a scandal.

"We'd best turn back," Lord Neville said, as a few drops of rain began to fall. The skies above London were heavy with ominous clouds and the park had long since cleared of other riders and carriages.

"You're right—it looks set to be a downpour," Emma replied as she tried to decide if she was upset or relieved that the young Lord had not dropped any hints about his intentions toward her.

Lord Neville walked her to the front door of Liscarroll House and seemed inclined to linger, despite the rain which was now bucketing down upon them.

"I shall see you soon," he said earnestly, taking her gloved hand and dropping a chaste kiss upon it. "I know that things might seem bleak at the moment, Lady Emma, but never fear! This shall blow over in a week or two, and once it does, I'll have Mama arrange a weekend party in Essex."

"Until then," Emma replied with a smile that she hoped appeared sweet, for to her it felt like a grimace. She stole inside the door,

rainwater dripping from the brim of her bonnet, and once it had closed behind her she gave an audible sigh of irritation.

"So, he did not propose?"

Georgette, who must have been looking out the window of the drawing room, materialised before Emma causing her to start.

"Oh," Emma smiled, her hand upon her chest. "You gave me a fright, Your Grace. No, Lord Neville did not propose—though he hinted that he would, once last night's scandal has died away from memory."

"Oh, dear," Georgette fiddled with the string of pearls around her neck—an act so unlike the perfectly composed Duchess that it made Emma nervous.

"Is everything alright?" Emma asked, even though she knew perfectly well that it wasn't. How could anything be alright when half of London thought she had tried to shoot the Duke of Liscarroll? Even if the other half didn't believe it, they would always have their suspicions. Oh, she cursed herself, how could she have been so stupid?

"Lady Castlereagh wrote to me this afternoon," Georgette confessed, ushering Emma into the front drawing room and away from the listening ears of the footmen. Georgette closed the door firmly behind her and gave Emma a very sombre look—a look so serious that it reminded Emma of the expression the physician had worn when he told her that her father had passed.

"I'm afraid," Georgette said hesitantly, "That you will not be receiving an Almack's voucher at this time."

"Oh," Emma felt relieved. "Thank goodness that's all it is—you were so serious I thought that someone had died."

"Being refused a voucher for Almack's is almost like a death," Georgette chastised her. "Oh, heavens. Whatever will we do?"

"I'm sorry," Emma replied, her heart aching not for herself but for the Dowager Duchess, who seemed so upset by the turn of events. "It's all my fault."

"Oh, pish-posh, it's not your fault at all, dear," Georgette replied, placing a comforting arm around Emma's shoulders. "It's just like Peter to go and get himself shot and upend all my well laid plans."

"Well, actually..." Emma was about to correct the Duchess and say that perhaps it wasn't entirely the Duke's fault that someone had tried to kill him, but Georgette cut her off.

"Honestly, one would swear that he goes out of his way to annoy me," she said with a sigh, "And now he's off gallivanting like it's all a great, big adventure. Do you know; if anyone tries to shoot him again, I shall be the number one suspect—I'm that annoyed!"

Emma stifled a giggle at Georgette's melodramatic outburst, for though her words were sharp, her eyes were warm with affection for

her errant son.

"Come," Emma led Georgette to the sofa in the middle of the room. "We may not have had the best of days—but that doesn't mean we can't enjoy some cake."

And so, the two ladies put their cares, and murderous thoughts, aside and rang for a helping of tea and cakes.

#

Chapter Eleven

"Dash it," Amberford said as Peter finished his tale. "Do you really think Lady Thornton capable of such a thing?"

"Arabella is capable of almost anything," Peter replied with a shrug, "And with the help of Lord Sandby—who you may remember does not hold me in the highest regard—I think it's perfectly possible that either, or both, of them tried to shoot me."

"Hmm..." Amberford, despite having seen Lord Sandby attempt to run Peter down just a few days before, did not sound too convinced.

"Can you think of anyone else?" he asked, leaning forward in his chair so that the other patrons of White's would not hear him. "I know you say that there's no way Lady Emma could have done it, but she was seen covered in blood, just a few minutes after the event."

"It was not Emma," Peter was resolute, "Besides, whoever shot at me shot from the doorway—they were too far away to have ended up with my blood on their clothes."

He lapsed into silence as he tried to recall the events of last night. There was something niggling at the back of his mind, but he could not for the life of him remember what it was. Someone had entered the room and shot at him, that was his official tale, and yet...

"Well, this French maid then?" Amberford persisted. "She wasn't in her room when Lady Emma went looking for her. Is there any reason she might want to shoot you?"

His friend's words were heavy with meaning and Peter bristled at what he was insinuating.

"I don't bed any of my servants," he said to Amberford with a cool glare. Other men, many, many other men, often used their

position of power to lure young ladies in their employ into bed, but Peter was not one of them. He preferred women to come willingly to his bed and not because they were afraid of losing their position.

"So, it's either Lady Thornton or Lord Sandby then," Amberford finished with a shrug. "Or both of them together—though I rather think that's unlikely. Perhaps it was Sandby alone who attempted it, but Lady Thornton is aware of what he's done."

Amberford trailed off thoughtfully and Peter used the lull in conversation to inspect the other members of the club who were present.

Do any of them wish me dead? He took in each face, all familiar, some friends, some foes, and decided that he could not be certain about some of them. He was ruthless in his business dealings, as Emma knew full well, and won often at the card table. He lived a life that many men envied and many more begrudged—but who hated him enough to pull the trigger on a pistol?

"We need a plan," Amberford said, clicking his fingers and pulling Peter out of his wandering thoughts. "We need to get Sandby and Lady Thornton to confess somehow."

"A jolly good idea," Peter replied sarcastically, "But how do we do that?"

"We need to get them alone somewhere," Amberford continued, his handsome face scrunched up in thought, "Let me think upon it, old boy."

Peter resisted rolling his eyes at his friend's enthusiastic optimism. If Amberford thought that by simply getting Sandby and Arabella alone, that he could induce them to confess, then who was Peter to dash his hopes?

At least you know there's one person who did not try to shoot you, he though affectionately. He and Amberford had been chums since their first night in Eton, when they had both been petrified ten-year olds. The friendship had endured school, Oxford, and their first few hedonistic years in London, and if there was one person in the world that Peter could trust, it was Amberford.

A roar of laughter went up from the other side of the room and Peter saw that a group of the club's younger members—already in their cups, despite the early hour—were crowded around a table looking at something.

"Looks like they're having a bet on something," Amberford commented with interest, rising from his seat to wander over and see what was going on.

Peter followed him, as inclined as his friend was to find some distraction from their sleuthing--which was going nowhere fast.

"What's the book about boys?" Amberford called cheerfully as he reached the table of young-bloods. Peter recognised a few of his peers' younger brothers amongst the bunch and a few of the season's most notorious tear-aways.

"Just placing bets on who tried to do in Liscarroll," one, particularly drunk, lad called over his shoulder.

"And who, dare I ask, is the favourite?" Peter asked smoothly, amused to see the young lad who had spoken, turn a deathly shade of pale as he recognised that it was the Duke of Liscarroll to whom he had spoken.

"Um, um, um," the lad looked helplessly at his friends, who shifted nervously now that the object of their fun and antics was before them.

Peter leaned forward and swiftly plucked the infamous betting book from the table. The last few pages were covered with fresh ink and listed the name of the person who had placed the bet, alongside their chosen suspect and the amount they had wagered.

Lud, Peter thought as he scanned the list of wagers, this was not good. For, upon the page, listed no fewer than ten times, was the name Lady Emma Percival.

"I see my ward has come in for some scrutiny," Peter commented lightly. Outwardly he knew that he presented a cool, collected facade,

but inside his mind was reeling. This could ruin Emma. She would find herself snubbed and shunned by society evermore-unless...

"Well, given that she was heard saying she wished someone would shoot you and was then spotted covered in blood," the drunk lad argued, oblivious to Peter's quelling glare. "It would rather seem that it was her, would it not? Not to mention all the bad blood between you and the late Earl. She had every reason to shoot you, your Grace."

"She had no reason to shoot me," Peter interjected smoothly, his mouth moving quicker than his brain. "Especially when she had only just consented to marry me."

"She what?"

The young men gathered around the table stared at Peter with incredulity, as did Lord Amberford whose mouth was open with shock. Ignoring his friend's look of censure, Peter carried on with his lie, full sure that it was the right thing to do.

"Yes," he said, raising his voice so that everyone in the room would hear. "Lady Emma has done me the great honour of consenting to be my Duchess. As such, any more talk of her as being a suspect in my attempted murder will be viewed by me as a slur upon her honour. Have one of the footmen burn that page boys, or I shall have to call each and every one of you out. Do you hear?"

The young men nodded their heads dumbly and, satisfied that he had achieved something, Peter swept from the room.

It was only when he stopped to take his hat from the footman that the enormity of what he had done hit him.

"Do you think Lady Emma will mind that you've declared her your betrothed without consulting her first?" Amberford whispered once he had caught up with Peter.

"She most likely will shoot me dead," Peter replied cheerfully, "Which will mean all my efforts at protecting her name have been for nought."

Nought except for the rather giddy excitement which had Peter suppressing a broad, smug smile.

Well, that went well, he thought as he danced down the steps of the club. He had started the day as the victim of a crime and ended it betrothed to one of the most beautiful creatures in all of London. He could only hope that Emma would feel as satisfied with the day's outcome as he—though, somehow, he doubted that would be her reaction.

"Is that you dear?"

His mother had missed her calling as an English Setter, Peter

thought as he heard her voice call out from the drawing room. He had been attempting to make a quiet entrance, so that he could mull over how he would break the news to Emma of their engagement, but Georgette had heard him.

"It is," Peter poked his head around the door of the front drawing room to find his mother and Emma dining upon a lavish afternoon tea.

"Well," Georgette waved a hand, "Don't just stand there, you're letting in a draught. Come, have a cake."

Peter hesitated, not for long, but long enough for his mother to cast him a curious look.

"Is something the matter?" she asked in alarm, holding a hand to her heart. "I could not stand another shock after the letter I received this afternoon."

"Oh?" it was Peter's turn to be curious now, "What happened?"

In her rather melodramatic way, which included much sighing and clutching at her bosom, Georgette explained that Emma had been refused a voucher for Almack's.

"I can't blame them, truthfully," Georgette finished with a sad glance at Emma. "For the evidence does rather seem stacked against us, but Almack's was one of my greatest hopes of finding Emma a husband."

"Well then," Peter brightened considerably, "If that's what's upsetting you so, I have some rather wonderful news."

And so, feeling rather buoyed that the refusal of the Almack's voucher had further justified his actions, Peter cheerfully explained that he had announced his betrothal to Emma in front of half the ton.

"All's well that ends well," he finished brightly, glancing from Emma to his mother and waiting for their gleeful reaction.

"Oh, dear."

Peter felt himself deflate at those two words.

"What?" he asked defensively, setting down the pink fancy in his hand and doing his best to look commanding, masculine and more like the head of the household. "You said so yourself that Emma would never find a husband—well, I've found one for her."

As indignant as he felt, even Peter could not fail to see the ghostly-pale look on Emma's face. He longed, no yearned, to take her in his arms and comfort her. But, of course, that would have to wait until after they were married, or at least alone.

"I think I need my smelling salts," Georgette said, standing up and brushing down her skirts. "If you'll excuse me, I'll go fetch them."

The instant that the door closed behind his mother, Peter realised why she hadn't called for a maid to fetch them for her. There was a moment's silence before his beautiful betrothed erupted.

"How dare you?" Emma hissed, her eyes flashing with anger.

"I thought it the best course of action," Peter responded as calmly as he could. Honestly—had she not heard what his mother had said about her prospects vanishing?

"Well, thank you for making such a huge, life altering decision, without consulting me first."

"You're welcome," Peter replied graciously as though he had not noticed that her comment was dripping with sarcasm.

"You are the most infuriating man who ever lived," Emma cried in response to his mocking tone, jumping from her seat so that she could pace the room.

"Yes, you've mentioned that before," Peter replied, his temper now more than a little frayed by her ungracious reaction. "No one could have failed to hear you last night, telling me how irritating I am and that you wished someone would shoot me dead. You're as much to blame for this as I."

His words went a tad too far, for Emma paused mid-step, her shoulders slumped, and to Peter's alarm, she began to sob softly.

"Oh, you're right," she sniffed helplessly.

Lud, he had been waiting for the moment that she would finally admit that he was right, and that following his plan of action was the only course she could take. But now that she had, it was more like a stab to the heart than a victory.

"Do you know how long I've yearned to hear you say that," he said gruffly, standing so that he could be closer to her. "And now the moment is ruined because I have upset you so."

"I do apologise," Emma replied mockingly, as she blew her nose on her handkerchief.

"No need for apologies," Peter replied, glad to see a bit of her spark had returned. "There will be ample opportunity for you to tell me I'm right again, over the course of our marriage."

Perhaps it was too soon for jesting about the matter, he thought ruefully, as Emma turned on him with a stern expression.

"You cannot marry me, Your Grace," she admonished, her expression determined.

"And why not?"

Peter loved a good argument as well as the next man, especially when he knew that he held the trump cards of reason and necessity. Emma could talk all she liked about how they could not be married, but for her every point, Peter would be able to point out why they should.

"You don't love me, nor I you," she began, and Peter snorted in response.

Typical woman, attempting to argue emotionally rather than

rationally.

"You can't know how I feel, or how I will one day feel about you," he replied easily. "And, besides, there are not many marriages that begin with love—as you well know. You were perfectly happy to consider accepting Lord Neville's proposal, when you did not love him, so why should mine be any different?"

His reason left her silent and Peter knew that he had won. He wanted to continue, to say that the only reason she did not wish to be his bride was because she was afraid of the passion which simmered between them, but he kept his silence. It would startle her too much, if he began to speak of the yearning she inspired in him, and that he knew she felt too. Better to stay silent and guide her patiently in her future explorations of pleasure.

"Yes," she finally replied, her hand at her neck fiddling with the chain of her locket. "But Lord Neville is sweet, kind, biddable—"

"Biddable?" Peter gave a laugh of derision. "Believe me Emma, you are not the type of woman who requires a biddable husband. You need someone who can nurture your passion, not dampen it like a wet blanket."

"Oh, and you think you're just that person?"

"As a matter of fact, I do."

Peter moved closer to her, so that their faces were only inches apart. He was so close that he could see her pupils dilate with desire as she realised what he was about to do.

With the skill of a much practised man, Peter reached out and drew Emma toward him so that her body was pressed against his, and then he slowly dropped his head and placed his lips upon hers.

Gemini, he thought with alarm, he might be an old hand at kissing women, but he had never felt anything like this. The instant that his lips met Emma's a jolt of need surged through him; the woman in his hands was surely on fire, so hot did her body feel against his.

He felt drunk with lust—and something else. A tenderness, much at odds with the roaring beast inside his chest, gripped him. He had never held a woman and felt her, like he had with Emma. Not just her physical form, but everything about her—her spark, humour, wit and vulnerability—was palpable.

"Lud," he croaked, as they broke apart.

"Indeed," came her faint reply.

Peter had every intention, once he had caught his breath, of resuming their passionate embrace, but was interrupted by the arrival of his mother.

"Gosh, they seem to have done the trick," Georgette trilled as she entered the room waving a small bottle of salts.

"Quite an accomplishment, when the seal is not even broken," Peter replied dryly, taking a step away from Emma so that the distance between them was more appropriate.

His mother noted his movement with knowing, triumphant eyes, but kept her peace.

"Well," Peter continued in a determined voice, though he still felt rather frazzled. "We have sorted the matter at hand."

"You have?"

"Yes," Emma interrupted before Peter had a chance to respond. "We have agreed that the arrangement is but a temporary fix, until his Grace discovers just who it was who tried to shoot him, and clears my name."

They had agreed no such thing, but Peter smiled none the less. His betrothed was clever, he would give her that, but after that kiss, there was no way that he would relinquish her hand—no matter what tricks she played.

#

Chapter Twelve

Emma was livid. No, worse than that, she was apoplectic with rage.

How dare he announce our engagement without asking me first, she thought furiously to herself for the hundredth time, as she dressed the next morning for breakfast.

Anouk, who could usually be counted upon to make some kind of barbed comment, was quiet. Emma, who had been absorbed with her annoyance at the Duke, only noticed how pale and wan the French girl looked when the process of dressing was finished.

"Are you quite alright, Anouk?" she asked with concern, "You're frightfully pale."

"Oui, I am fine," Anouk replied with none of her usual spark, "I am tired, zat is all."

Tired was an understatement, Emma thought with alarm, for there were dark circles under the girl's eyes and her face seemed thinner than it had just yesterday.

She looks like she didn't sleep a wink, Emma observed as she bid the girl return to her bedchamber. Perhaps she was ill, or—this

thought gave Emma a jolt—perhaps Anouk had not been able to sleep because of a guilty conscience.

This thought niggled at Emma as she made her way down to the dining room for breakfast. Her maid had not been in her room when the Duke was shot, and had lied about her whereabouts on the night in question. It was all very strange.

"Oh, good morning," Emma started as she entered the room and saw that there was someone else at the table beside the Duke. Mr Humphreys, the librarian who had come to catalogue the Duke's collection, gave Emma a blind smile from behind his thick-lens glasses.

"You are a vision of radiance, my dear," Mr Humphreys commented in a fusty manner, most suited to a librarian, as Emma took her seat.

Due to the way in which Humphreys spoke to the wall over her shoulder, rather than to Emma herself, she knew that the older man had merely offered her a compliment for the sake of it, rather than because he had been so struck by her radiance.

It's a wonder he can see the manuscripts he works on, Emma thought as she watched Humphreys attempt to spear a sausage on his plate. The librarian missed the sausage, so that his fork clattered noisily against the china, and gave an embarrassed giggle.

"Frightfully near-sighted, I'm afraid," he said apologetically as he peered over the rim of his spectacles so he could more accurately judge the distance between the fork and the sausage.

"Comes from a lifetime of having your nose stuck in a book, I expect," the Duke replied cheerfully. "I always found reading tiresome."

"I expect it's all the long words," Emma said brightly with an innocent look to her betrothed. "Long words and sentences are bound to tire a man of your advanced years."

"Oh, yes," Humphreys interjected, with a nod in Emma's direction. "I find reading quite tiresome too, your Grace—especially for extended periods of time. We must take it a little easier, as the years go on, mustn't we?"

Emma hid her smile behind her hand; she had not expected that the fusty librarian would assist her in her mission to vex the Duke, but he had. To be included in Humphreys' sad lament about ageing had obviously wounded Liscarroll's pride, for he shot her a dark look.

"It's not my age that tires me," Liscarroll said, his sensuous mouth breaking into a wicked grin. "It's just that I am more suited to physical pursuits."

Emma flushed at his emphasis on the word "physical" and the pointed look he gave her. It was too early in the morning to be

thinking of such things and, yet, unbidden images of the Duke's athletic frame came to mind. She gave a shiver of desire as her mind wandered further, but thankfully the entrance of Georgette pulled her back to earth. Not before she noticed, much to her chagrin, Liscarroll's lazy, triumphant smile—he had noticed how much he had unsettled her.

"There you are, my dears," Georgette said as she took a seat at table. "I have been looking for you both everywhere."

"You can't have been looking that hard mother," the Duke replied, turning his attention to the morning's papers which were spread out before him on the table. "I've been up since eight and this is the first I've seen of you."

"It's not like me to be up at such an early hour, I know," Georgette replied, missing her son's point, "But I was hardly able to sleep with worry."

Emma, again, hid a smile behind her hand. It was past ten—hardly an early hour by most people's estimates. But Georgette, who before she became a Duchess had been the only daughter of a Marquess, had never known any hardship in her life, or a broken night's sleep.

"Don't be worried, Mother," the Duke replied with a nonchalant shrug, "It's not you this person—or persons—wish to shoot, it's me."

"You are my only son," Georgette cried dramatically in response, "How can I not be worried when someone wants you dead."

"Do you," a voice interrupted hesitantly, "Have any idea who the culprit might be?"

Humphreys, whom Emma had forgotten was still at the table, looked at the Duke curiously from behind his glasses.

"I have a vague idea," Liscarroll waved a dismissive hand, as though he no longer wished to speak of the matter, but Georgette perked up at the mention of a suspect.

"Who?" she demanded.

"There are two people whom I suspect," Emma watched as the Duke struggled to maintain an indifferent air in the face of his mother's blatant curiosity.

"Well, who are they then?" Georgette prompted and, had she been sitting any closer to the Duke, Emma was sure she would have prodded him with her finger to urge him to elaborate further.

"Two people who attended the ball, who had previously given me reason to think they wished me harm."

"Oh, for goodness sake Peter," Georgette huffed, throwing her fork down. "There is no need for all this subterfuge. I am your Mother, Emma is your betrothed, and I'm sure Mr Humphreys isn't about to write to the papers naming these people. Just tell me who you think it

might be."

"Fine," Liscarroll snapped, crumbling under the weight of his mother's interrogations. "Lady Thornton and Lord Sandby—I fear they both have separate reasons for wishing to harm me."

"Oh, Peter," Georgette shook her head sadly, "I do wish that you'd be a bit more circumspect in your dealings with people."

The injustice of his mother's comment left the Duke silent and allowed Emma to give voice to her own suspicions.

"There's also Anouk," she piped up before explaining to a confused Georgette that the French maid had been absent during the time of the incident and had also lied about her whereabouts.

"The only issue with that theory," Liscarroll said, once Emma had finished her piece, "Is that as far as I can see, Anouk has no reason for wishing to shoot me."

"She might be a light-fingered thief, like the girl who stole the Countess of Warwickshire's jewellery collection," Georgette cried excitedly.

"But nothing was stolen," Peter pointed out calmly, "And the person who shot me entered the library after I did, which means they followed me in."

"Oh," Georgette deflated a little bit at this but luckily, Mr Humphreys distracted her.

"Might I suggest a plan, your Grace?" he said, blinking across the table at the Duke. Liscarroll nodded and the older man continued speaking, pushing his spectacles further up his nose. "Perhaps, and this is just a suggestion, the best way to smoke out your suspects is to gather them altogether in one place?"

"You mean another ball?" the Duke replied with a look of distaste on his face. Emma knew that holding one ball per season was the maximum that Liscarroll could tolerate—he was not a social butterfly.

"Too big," Humphreys replied, "And not long enough. You need to spend time with your suspects, try to get them to slip up in someway...perhaps a house party in your Sussex estate? It's close enough that no one will have a valid reason to refuse the invitation."

Emma watched as the Duke considered the proposition, his handsome face drawn into a thoughtful frown. Despite the gravity of the conversation, her eyes still noted that a lock of the Duke's too long hair had fallen into his eyes and a violent urge to reach out and brush it away overtook her.

I'd kill them all with shock, if I did that, Emma thought with amusement at the idea of performing such an intimate act in front of an audience. What would the ton say then, if she was to be found at the table with the bodies of the Duke, his mother and the congenial librarian?

"I think it's a smashing idea," Liscarroll eventually answered, giving Humphreys a congratulatory smile. "A weekend party in Sussex is just the trick; Mother, would you be so kind as to arrange the invitations? Add a few friendlier faces to the mix, if you can."

Georgette nodded in agreement and stood to leave the table.

"I'd best get to it, if I have another party to arrange," she said with a sigh. "Don't forget, you two, that we have a ball at Lord Marlborough's this evening. It shall be your first public appearance together since the engagement was officially announced, so be on your best behaviour. And, please, Sweet-Pea, try not to get yourself shot again."

With that piece of sage, motherly advice, Georgette departed leaving Emma alone with the Duke and Mr Humphreys.

"I'd best return to my work," the librarian said, pushing away his plate which was now empty. "Perhaps, if I may be so bold, Your Grace, I might suggest that I travel down with you to Sussex? I can have a look at the Papyrus of Ani and finish cataloguing your whole collection."

"Wonderful idea, my man," Liscarroll agreed, and the librarian cheerfully departed. Emma would have followed him if it were not for the fact that a footman arrived and placed a plate of kippers before her. Her stomach grumbled audibly and she knew that to leave would be most conspicuous.

"Was there anything else in the papers?" she questioned as she began to tuck into her breakfast.

"Only idle gossip about our engagement," Liscarroll shrugged, "They seem to have abandoned the idea that you are an aspiring murderess."

"Thank goodness for that," Emma replied, then put her fork down as a thought occurred to her. "Oh, dear. Poor Lord Neville, he will be most upset to learn I am engaged, when I promised just yesterday to wait for him."

This declaration seemed to amuse the Duke, for he gave her a lazy smile.

"The lad can consider it a lesson learned," Liscarroll said, as he pushed back his chair to stand. "And it's a good one for a boy to learn when he's young."

Emma was about to ask Liscarroll to enlighten her as to what that lesson was, but before she could open her mouth to speak, the Duke had crossed the room to stand before her. His hand reached out and cupped her chin, tilting her face so that she could look nowhere but at him.

"Poor Lord Neville will know the next time he is presented with a beautiful woman that he must stake his claim straight away, or risk

losing her forever."

Liscarroll stooped to brush a possessive kiss across her lips, his hand still holding her chin. The brief feel of his lips on hers left Emma light-headed with need; so light-headed that she could not feel indignant about his proprietary remarks. He stood back and surveyed her with an amused smile upon his face, before giving her a wink and departing.

Oh, he was infuriating, Emma thought. But, what was more infuriating, was the disappointment she felt when he left.

Lord and Lady Marlborough's ballroom was thronged with people and, each and every one of them, Emma felt, was staring at her. They had only arrived ten minutes before but already it seemed like she had exchanged polite words with hundreds of people, most of whom did not even try to disguise their blatant curiosity.

"This is going well," Georgette commented with a forced tone of cheerfulness. Even the indefatigable Dowager Duchess appeared overwhelmed by the blatant interest that the crowd showed the newly engaged Duke and his ward.

"If by well you mean that I have managed thus far not to punch anyone," Liscarroll responded dryly, "Then yes, mother. It's going swimmingly."

Georgette opened her mouth to chastise her son, but a group of her friends—all matriarchs of the ton's finest families—swept over to steal her away.

"I suppose we should consider ourselves lucky that she deigned to grace us with ten minutes of her time," Liscarroll whispered conspiratorially into Emma's ear, as she watched the Dowager Duchess cross the room.

She started a little at the feel of his warm breath on her neck; really, did he have to lean so close?

"Indeed," she replied vaguely, so distracted by his nearness that she could not think of a proper reply.

To Emma's relief, Lord Amberford materialised at the Duke's side, diverting her betrothed's attention from his mission to rattle her. The two men fell into conversation about a horse which was due to run at Aintree the next day and Emma allowed her mind to drift.

As well as the brooding Duke who stood beside her, there was another reason she felt so distracted--Anouk.

That evening, as the French girl had helped Emma into a dress of midnight-blue satin, Emma had informed the Lady's Maid of their imminent departure to Sussex.

"Zuzex?" Anouk had appeared horrified by the idea. "But that is so far away. I won't go."

"It's only for a weekend," Emma had replied, a little alarmed by the girl's irate reaction. "And Sussex is not that far. I'm not taking you on a trip to India, Anouk. Do calm down."

Telling Anouk to calm down had the opposite effect that Emma had hoped, and she had been forced to endure much muttering and an excess of poking and prodding as Anouk styled her hair. By the time that Emma was finally dressed to leave, she was sure that she was covered in a dozen tiny bruises.

The bruises she could endure, but what was harder to deal with was the growing feeling of suspicion she felt toward Anouk. There was no reason for the French girl to have been so vehemently opposed to a few days away in the countryside. As a Lady's Maid, she was expected to travel wherever her mistress went without question. The only reason that Emma could think of for Anouk's overreaction was that the girl was hiding something. But what? The idea that Anouk had tried to shoot Liscarroll did not sit well with Emma, but she could not ignore the girl's suspicious behaviour. Something wasn't right.

"Are you quite alright, my Lady?"

Emma returned to the present moment, to find Lord Amberford looking at her expectantly, as though he was waiting for a reply.

"Oh," Emma patted her hair with a nervous hand. "Did you say something, my Lord? I'm afraid I was miles away."

"I just asked if you are excited about your impending nuptials," Amberford replied easily, with an amused glance at the Duke. "Though by your distracted air, I can only assume that you are already thinking of what hair ribbon to wear on the day."

"Indeed," Emma replied with a smile that was more like a grimace. It was so like a man to assume that the only thing a woman might think of was her hair. As if she didn't have one hundred other things to ponder! She caught sight of Liscarroll who was watching her with narrowed eyes. It seemed, unlike his friend, that the Duke knew Emma's thoughts were on far more serious matters than baubles.

"Oh, look," she said with relief, as she spotted a familiar face. "There is Lord Neville, I pray you will both forgive me, but I need to have a word."

With a tight smile to both gentlemen, Emma fled in the direction of Lord Neville. What did it say about her betrothed, when she would far prefer to have an awkward conversation with a jilted suitor, than to remain under his knowing gaze?

#

Chapter Thirteen

"Well, now are you convinced?"

Peter only had to glance at his friend to know that Raff was far from persuaded as to Emma's innocence. The Marquess' gaze followed Emma as she crossed the room, his tawny eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"No woman is that distracted by ribbons," Amberford said after a moment, his eyes meeting Peter's. "She was a million miles away and, if you'll forgive me for saying, she looks rather pale and wan."

"She does seem fatigued by the whole affair," Peter agreed, concern for his ward needling him. He should be protecting Emma, not subjecting her to the relentless scrutiny of the ton.

"She's exhausted alright," Amberford shrugged, "And my money is that guilt is what's keeping her awake."

Peter bristled with annoyance at his friend's words. It was admirable that Amberford was too concerned about Peter's wellbeing to hide his animosity toward Emma, but Peter wished that his friend would take him at his word. Emma was not the person who had tried to shoot him, that was all that Amberford needed to know.

Peter watched his betrothed idly from across the room as she engaged poor Lord Neville in conversation. The young lad, who was dressed in a coat of flamboyant yellow, stared at Emma with hopeful, puppy-dog eyes.

Peter turned his attention away; even he was not so hard-hearted that he could watch a young man have his heart broken for the first time.

"You'll just have to trust me," Peter said to Amberford, who conceded nothing but did give a nod of acknowledgement.

The Marquess took his leave and Peter was left to traipse the periphery of the ballroom. He was in no mood for small talk and gifted anyone who tried to accost him with a steely glare. There was no one alive with thick enough skin to approach him when he was in such obvious dark humour. Well, no one that is except--

"Oh dear, Liscarroll. You're looking far too forbidding for a man who has just announced his engagement."

Arabella, Lady Thornton, smiled slyly up at Peter, her almond shaped eyes dancing with devilment. Peter stifled a groan at the sight of his former lover. The last thing he needed whilst in such a bad mood was Arabella's take on charming conversation.

"Arabella," Peter gave a stiff nod, "You're looking ravishing, as

ever."

In truth, Arabella was looking a tad under-dressed. Her eye-catching, red-velvet gown was cut daringly low at the front so that her pearly-white bosom was practically on display for all to see. Had he really once found her titillating? Peter wondered at his former taste in partners and could not help but compare Lady Thornton to Emma. Where Arabella was brash, needy and far too suggestive, Emma was composed, self-reliant and so innocently seductive that it made Peter's heart sing...along with other organs, which he did not care to mention.

"I like to remind a man what it is he's missing," Arabella replied with a throaty laugh, reaching out with one, gloved hand to touch his forearm. Inadvertently and due entirely to her proximity, Peter's eyes dropped to Arabella's heaving bosom which was near pressed against his chest. As his eyes lifted from his former lover's endowments, they met with a pair of cool, blue eyes from across the room.

Lady Emma's cool, blue eyes.

Drat.

"Oh, dear," Arabella followed the line of his gaze, triumph written on her beautiful face.

"I should go to her," Peter murmured, but Arabella's hand shot out and gripped his forearm with surprising strength.

"Don't be silly," she whispered, "Take a woman's advice—a little jealousy can do a lot for a relationship."

Peter was rather inclined to remind Arabella that the last time she had tried to introduce a "little jealousy" into a relationship, it had ended with her threatening to shoot him, but he resisted. The woman before him was beautiful, alluring and highly dangerous; a fact he would do well to remember.

"How is Lord Sandby?" he questioned dryly, not entirely able to resist goading her.

"Sandby is well enough—I think." Arabella replied, her eyes flashing malice at the mention of the name.

"I think?" Peter echoed thoughtfully but Arabella did not elaborate. Instead, she turned her face to the ballroom and Peter had the satisfaction of watching the mask of contentment she wore fall into an expression of great displeasure. His satisfaction lasted only a moment, for he too turned and saw what had so greatly displeased Lady Thornton.

Emma and Lord Sandby were deep in conversation on the other side of the room. The blonde haired Earl was standing far too close to Emma for Peter's liking—though Emma seemed to like it well enough. Her beautiful face was turned up to the Earl's and she wore a relaxed, beaming smile that she had never displayed in Peter's presence.

"They seem rather close, do they not?" Arabella said, her eyes narrowing as she watched the pair.

"No closer than anyone else," Peter replied with a forced tone of disinterest. His remark was then contradicted as the Earl took Emma's hand and led her out onto the dance floor for the next dance, which was to be a waltz. The beautiful blonde pair could not help but draw the eye and Peter hit by a surge of jealousy.

"Sandby does like to play with fire," Arabella remarked, turning to look at Peter with a wicked smile. "He knows you must suspect him of being responsible for the shooting at the ball—given your history—and yet, here he is, dancing with your bride to be. They do seem to be getting along well; perhaps they plotted to kill you together?"

It was, of course, a ridiculous suggestion, but even though he knew that Arabella was deliberately trying to arouse his suspicion, Peter could not help but be pierced by a blade of doubt. He glanced again at the pair, who were both laughing gaily as they whirled around the dance floor, and doubt turned to jealous rage.

"Excuse me," Peter said stiffly to Arabella, pushing past her and making toward Emma and Lord Sandby. A dark, red mist of rage had descended on his mind and Peter moved without thinking. He cut through the dancing couples on the floor, who stared at him with shock, before reaching Lord Sandby and placing a firm hand upon his shoulder.

"Excuse me," Peter said to the Earl, "I think you'll find that this dance was actually saved for me."

Sandby had dropped Emma's hand and Peter quickly reached for it, placed his other hand on Emma's waist and swiftly steered her across the dance floor.

"What on earth are you doing?" Emma hissed, glancing over her shoulder at the guests who lined the dance floor, who were all watching them with unconcealed glee.

"What am I doing?" Peter drew himself up indignantly, "I am the one who should ask what you think you're doing, fraternising with the enemy?"

His simmering anger was palpable, but it did nothing to quash Emma's defiant outrage at his appalling lack of manners.

"I was not fraternising with the enemy," she countered in a furious whisper. "I was dancing with Lord Sandby because he asked me to. It would have seemed strange for me to refuse him or give him the cut, when we had only just been speaking of the ruddy weekend party you have invited him to."

By Peter's standards "ruddy" was hardly the worst swear word in the dictionary, but he had never heard Emma swear before and so he knew that he had overstepped the line. Still, indignation was a

difficult emotion to dampen once its flames had taken hold and he continued to question her, despite knowing that it was not the brightest of ideas.

"You were *smiling* at him in a strange way," Peter said petulantly as he executed a graceful turn. "I have never once seen you smile at me like that."

"I was smiling at him because he was being *nice* to me," Emma quickly shot back. "If you want to see me smile that way at you, perhaps you should try being nice, for once in your life?"

Nice? Pah. Peter resisted giving a snort of derision at the word, but only just. Nice was for children and maiden aunts—not a woman as beautiful and passionate as Emma. Still, he could not help but feel a little pressure to show her just how nice he could be.

"You look ravishing tonight," he offered.

"That, your Grace, is a compliment," Emma replied with a roll of her eyes. "A compliment which was dragged from you under duress, I might add. That does not count as being nice."

Gah. Peter rolled his eyes; was being nice really that difficult? For a moment he wanted to run back to Lord Sandby and question him on what on earth a chap should do if he wanted to be considered nice. Though he quickly dismissed the idea.

"It was not given under duress," Peter argued, deciding that defending himself was the best option. "There was simply a lull in the conversation and I saw my opportunity to slip it in. You do look lovely—you always look lovely. Not just your face, though that is very pretty, but your general...being. You have an air about you, almost like there is a golden mist which follows you everywhere you go and bathes you in warm light."

Good Lord, where had that come from? Never in all his thirty-odd years upon this earth had Peter ever uttered such idiotic codswallop. He cringed inwardly as he waited for Emma to burst out laughing, and then cringed some more when he realised that if she did, he would be devastated. How fragile his ego was when he stood in Emma's orbit.

"Do you know? That's the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me."

"Really?" Peter swallowed his surprise; maybe he wasn't so bad at this stuff after all. Perhaps he might consider a career as a poet, he thought as his chest swelled with pride.

"Yes," Emma gave him a shy smile that set his heart soaring. It was a far nicer smile than the one she had bestowed upon Sandby—not that it was a competition, of course. The dance ended and together they walked back into the crowd, Peter gently directing Emma toward the ratafia and away from any other men who might try claim her for

a dance.

"I would say that sometimes it seems like a dark cloud follows you everywhere," Emma continued mischievously, "But tonight we are being kind to each other, so I shan't. In fact, you look very dashing, your Grace. You're by far the most striking man in the room."

"Pish-posh," was all that Peter could manage to reply, for there was a lump of some sort in his throat that made speaking rather difficult. Was this what courtship was like? Heightened emotions, unsurpassed joy at the littlest of compliments? If so, he was rather sad that he hadn't heeded his mother's advice years ago—though he couldn't imagine anyone else inducing the same reactions from him that Emma did.

"Oh," his betrothed started as she spotted a familiar face. Without explaining herself, Emma placed herself against the nearest marble column and tugged Peter by the lapels of his jacket, so that his body blocked her from view.

"Is everything alright?" he asked, not allowing his mind to give into the wicked thought that it would be so easy to push her gently against the column and devour her rose-bud mouth with his own.

"It's Beau Buckley," Emma whispered, peeking over his shoulder to check on Buckley's whereabouts.

"Has he done something to you?" Peter questioned; he would run the young buck through with a sword if he had.

"No," Emma gave him a look of gratitude, recognising the protectiveness of his tone. "I met him during my first season out. We were quite close, but when he asked for my father's permission to marry me, Papa refused. He said that Buckley was not good enough for me but, oh, I think Papa just wanted to keep me for a few years more."

A spurned lover was not what Peter had been expecting and the thoughts of a younger Emma even thinking of marrying someone else was enough to set his temper alight. Peter stole a glance at Mr Buckley, who was handsome, well dressed, and perfectly respectable looking, and found that he hated him on sight.

"Would you like to renew your acquaintance with Mr Buckley?" he found himself asking, despite not wishing to know the answer. His need to know was like a scab one knew they shouldn't pick at but felt compelled to do so, despite knowing it would only hurt.

"Goodness no," Emma gave a surprised laugh. "My father was right to refuse him. I thought that I would die at the time, but a few months later I had almost forgotten his name. I was too young, too much in love with the idea of love, to know what a marriage truly entailed. I know now that I did not love him, nor he I."

"Good," Peter replied a little pompously. His hatred for Buckley

quickly simmered away and though the man himself had also moved away from them, Peter remained in the same position. He rather enjoyed having Emma to himself.

"Good?" Emma arched an eyebrow in question.

"Yes," Peter placed a hand against the cool, marble column, so that she was trapped beneath his frame without any means of escape. "If you had married Mr Buckley, then you would not have been free to marry me."

"I thought we had discussed this, your Grace—"

"Peter," he corrected her idly.

"As we have discussed, *Peter*," Emma continued valiantly, her cheeks staining pink despite her obvious attempt to remain calm. "We will *not* be getting married, not ever."

"We'll see," Peter replied smoothly, not allowing himself to rise to the challenge in her voice.

Oh, she would see alright. As soon as they returned from Sussex, he would procure a special license and marry her the next morning. Come hell, high water, or even another murder attempt, Peter was more determined than ever to make Emma Percival his Duchess.

Later that evening, once Peter had returned his mother and Emma safely to Liscarroll House, he set out for White's. He would have preferred to retire for the night, but a note from Lord Amberford requesting his company had put any thoughts of sleep on hold.

Not that I would have slept well, Peter thought, for his mind was filled with Emma. Her soft, feminine scent, the way her blue eyes had gazed up at him all evening...Peter's mind was stuffed to bursting with images of his reluctant fiancée. A quick nip of brandy would help to ease the aching need which filled his body—a need which would only be satisfied once Lady Emma had declared "I do".

"Amberford," Peter called in greeting as he entered White's to find his friend seated by the club's famous bow-window. "What can I do for you at this late hour?"

The Marquess stood, and, as Peter approached, he saw that his friend's face looked drawn and tired, the opposite of how he had appeared just a few hours before at the ball.

"Lud, is everything alright?" Peter asked, as he took the seat opposite his friend.

"Mama has taken ill," Amberford said brusquely, as he beckoned for a footman to fetch them both a drink. "I must leave at once for Newcastle."

"I pray she will recover," Peter said sincerely, for he was quite fond of the Dowager Marchioness.

"Thank you," Amberford replied, "But that's not why I asked you here. My being in Newcastle means that I won't make it to Sussex with you, and I am worried, Liscarroll."

"Don't be silly," Peter gave a laugh at his friend's grave expression. "I'm well able to look after myself."

"I know you are when confronted head on," Amberford smiled, "But the person who tried to kill you shot you from behind. A conniving coward is far greater a risk to you; who knows when or how they might strike again?"

Peter knew that his friend was right and that the person who had attacked him might chance their luck again. This time, however, he would be on his guard.

"I know now to keep a watchful eye," Peter assured the Marquess, "So, if they do try anything again, I shall be more prepared this time."

"You must sleep with one eye open," Amberford advised, his handsome face still a picture of concern. "Tell me, have you spoken with any of the suspects?"

Peter nodded and, in a low tone, he explained his meeting with Arabella to Lord Amberford.

"She and Sandby appear to have fallen out," Peter finished, "And she was quick to point the finger at him and—"

"And?"

"Lady Emma; she seems to think they're in cahoots." Peter admitted, glaring at his friend as though daring him to comment.

Amberford sighed, took a deep sip of his brandy, and gave Peter a pleading look before he started to speak.

"I know that you do not wish to hear it, and I don't like saying it, but you must consider that there is the slightest chance Emma might have had a part to play in all this. She might not have orchestrated it, but she may have been convinced to be a party to it."

"I know that she was not," Peter replied stubbornly.

"And how do you know that?" Amberford asked gently. "You have to remember that once the opportunity to exact your revenge upon Lord Percival materialised, you jumped upon it. Who is to say that Emma did not do the same? A whispered word in her ear from Lord Sandby might have been all she needed..."

Peter allowed a moment for his friend's heavy words to settle. He knew that the Marquess only had his best interests at heart, but he felt the accusation he made against Emma like a sting.

Perhaps the reason it stings so, is because it is entirely plausible, a voice in his head whispered. Peter picked up his glass of brandy and finished it in one gulp.

Emma could not be guilty of plotting to kill him...could she?

#

Chapter Fourteen

The carriage ride to Pevensey Manor, the Duke's estate in Sussex, took just under a day. Emma had spent the journey admiring the quaint countryside outside the carriage window, and ignoring Anouk who huffed and puffed with anger for the entire journey.

"Oh, look, the sea" Emma cried with excitement as the carriage rounded the crest of a hill to reveal the breathtaking coastline. The sea was a brilliant blue, glittering under the evening sun, and in the distance, Emma could see the white cliff faces of The Seven Sisters.

"'Ow exciting," Anouk said with a sniff, not even bothering to glance out the window at the view.

Emma bit back a sigh of annoyance and glanced across at Georgette, who had been sound asleep since they had left London. She knew that if the Dowager Duchess had been awake, that Anouk would have attempted to behave a bit better.

The silence resumed and for the remainder of the journey the only sound to be heard was Georgette's gentle snoring. It took them another half an hour to reach Pevensey Manor and when the footman opened the carriage door, Emma was the first to alight, desperate to be away from her Lady's Maid.

"Oh," she breathed as she caught her first proper glimpse of the house.

It was enormous. A set of sweeping steps led to the front door and the main part of the house, which was in turn flanked on either side by two pavilions. Emma began to count the windows on the facade, but soon gave up, for there were too many.

"It's rather an eyesore," a low voice said from behind her.

"I think it's rather beautiful," she replied without turning around. She did not need to, for she would know that voice anywhere. "It's hard to believe that this is not your Ducal Seat, it's so grand."

"It's grander than the actual Ducal Seat in Liscarroll," the Duke replied with a laugh. "The first Duke was gifted a large chunk of County Cork by the Crown and he built a magnificent castle on the outskirts of the village of Liscarroll."

"Oh, how lovely," Emma responded; she had never been to Ireland, but she always imagined it to be a beautiful and wild place.

"It was lovely," Liscarroll replied easily, "Until the natives burned it down during one of their rebellions. The second castle was less lovely, but it lasted about one hundred years longer than the first

before another rebellion saw it burned to the ground like its predecessor."

"Goodness," Emma gasped, "And did anyone build another?"

"No," he laughed, his blue eyes dancing. "The Fourth Duke decided not to tempt fate, and he commissioned Pevensey Manor instead. So, there you have it, I am the Duke of a pile of rubble and nothing more."

Emma knew that this was not the case. Liscarroll probably could not even count the amount of estates he owned, and though a Castle no longer stood in Liscarroll, he still owned the lands around it.

"Now, we'd best get you inside," the Duke continued, "All the guests have been here for hours. Poor Mama prefers to sleep during a journey, so the drivers take it at a snail's pace, lest they drive over a bump and wake her. She's tremendously frightening when she's sleepy, I'll have you know."

He had just finished speaking, when a fresh faced Georgette emerged from the carriage, followed by Anouk.

"What a wonderful journey," the Dowager Duchess said, patting her hat, which was a little squished, with a gloved hand. "I'll just pop upstairs and get changed, then the party can begin!"

"Party?" Emma whispered nervously to the Duke as they followed Georgette inside. Unlike the older woman, Emma had not slept a wink, and her body was aching from being cooped up for so long. What she desired, more than anything, was a warm bed and good sleep.

"Just a late supper and drinks," Liscarroll said with a smile, "Don't worry, it won't go on past three."

Three o'clock? Emma did not know if she would last that long, but then she spotted a face in a window above peering down at them and changed her mind. For Lady Thornton was glaring down at her with such malice, that Emma just knew she was the one responsible for attempting to shoot the Duke.

Supper was not the light meal that Emma had envisaged, but rather an elaborate affair designed to show off the wealth of the estate. The first course was liver pate, followed by venison—which Emma was informed had been supplied by deer who had been roaming the downs just that very morning—and then freshly caught oysters to follow. Dessert consisted of half a dozen elaborate offerings; *Blancmange à la vanille,* nougat almond cake, trifle and a compote of peaches.

The guests, twelve in all, lingered over the sweet-course, happily conversing with each other as they devoured their desserts. Emma

spied Liscarroll deep in conversation with Lady Thornton, who sat to his right, while Georgette entertained the florid Colonel Bowers. Emma was seated between Lord Sandby, who had thus far ignored her in favour of the Countess of Warwickshire, who sat on the other side of him, and Mr Michael Pews, the local Vicar. Mr Pews, was not of the aristocracy, but he was—Georgette had informed her—the most dedicated of Vicars. Emma had idly wondered if Georgette's belief in young Mr Pew's dedication to his flock stemmed from his deep, soulful brown eyes, which were most arresting. The handsome vicar had been a gentle conversationalist during the seven courses, regaling Emma with tales of the local village and stories about the smugglers who had roamed the nearby coast.

Alas, his presence at her side was soon cut short, when Georgette beckoned him over to her.

"Forgive me," he had said apologetically to Emma as he stood.

Emma rather thought that anyone would forgive a man with such a charming smile anything at all, but once he had left, she felt rather alone.

"There's a rumour going around that your Mr Pews was once an actor in the Theatre Royal," Sandby whispered to Emma, as he finally tore his attention away from the Countess. "And that Her Grace was so taken with him, that she offered him the living in Pevensey."

"I'm sure that a rumour is all it is," Emma replied disapprovingly. Men could be such jealous creatures when confronted by a perfect example of the species such as Mr Pews.

"Of course," Sandby replied pompously. "I never like to give credence to rumours."

You just like spreading them instead, Emma thought as she hid a smile.

"Of course," Sandby looked nervous. "Some people are wont to believe whatever they hear."

"Indeed, I think some people rather prefer rumour to fact," Emma replied glumly, thinking of Lord Neville.

"We are a society that lives and breathes on gossip," Lord Sandby agreed, warming now to the topic. "I, myself, have been the subject of hundreds of rumours—due to my skill at the gaming tables—and while I am more inured to gossip than most, I must say the latest rumours swirling around about me are in very bad taste."

Emma held her breath; surely he was referring to the fact that many had whispered he might be the mysterious gunman?

"Still," Sandby said happily, as he spooned up some of his peach compote, "Liscarroll can't possibly think they're true, or he wouldn't have invited me down. Jolly good of him, we may not rub along too well, but even he knew that an invitation to Pevensey was as good as

a public endorsement of my innocence."

Emma bit her lip, feeling rather guilty at Sandby's naive assessment of the situation. Did he truly believe what he had said, or was he simply playing the affable fool for Emma's benefit? It was difficult to tell, but her instincts leaned more to the latter. But, if Lord Sandby was not the culprit, then who was?

Emma's hopes that the mystery would be solved over the course of the weekend were quickly fading. She glanced at the top of the table, where Lady Thornton was regaling Liscarroll with a story that must have been terribly amusing, for the Duke was roaring with laughter. A stab of jealousy pierced her as she observed the two. She had heard the rumours that the two had once been romantically involved and to see them now, one could easily speculate that they had rekindled that romance.

Emma must have been staring, for Lady Thornton turned and caught Emma's gaze. The beautiful widow gave a smug smile, before turning back to the Duke and whispering something in his ear.

"They seem rather close," Sandby commented glumly, for he too had been observing the pair.

"My father used always say that a pretty face can make a man forget anything," Emma responded with a forced cheerfulness. "Even, it seems, an engagement."

It was not like her to give voice to her feelings, but the jealousy she felt at Liscarroll's focused attention on Lady Thornton was laying waste to her good manners. Lord Sandby gave her a sympathetic smile, then leaned forward with a conspiratorial wink.

"Laugh," he whispered, to a rather confused Emma.

"I beg your pardon?" she replied.

"He's looking this way," Sandby continued, "Laugh like I've said something terribly funny."

It was the most childish thing she had done in her three and twenty years, but Emma, spurned into action by envy, threw back her head and gave a loud giggle.

"Oh, my Lord, you are so terribly funny," she added for effect.

It took all her willpower not to turn around and check to see if the Duke had noticed, but luckily Lord Sandby gave her an encouraging nod.

"He's livid," Sandby said happily; clearly delighted to have goaded his host.

At that moment, the Duke stood and the guests stopped their chatting to turn his way.

"I think," Liscarroll said with a smile that did not quite reach his eyes. "It is time for us men to partake of a brandy and plan for the hunt tomorrow."

"Oh, jolly good," Colonel Bowers called, and the guests began to stand. The ladies followed Georgette into the drawing room, to take tea, whilst the menfolk followed Liscarroll to the library in the East wing of the house.

"Are you quite alright, dear?" Georgette asked with concern, as Emma took a seat beside her on the plush, velvet sofa.

"I'm just tired," Emma replied quickly, hoping that Georgette had taken the dark scowl on her face for a symptom of indigestion.

"No wonder," the Dowager Duchess shook her head in despair, "All this murder business is frightfully tiring. I do hope that Peter manages to find out who it was, so that things can go back to normal and we can begin to organise the wedding."

"The wedding?" Emma glanced at Georgette in shock; surely she had not forgotten that her engagement to the Duke was no more than a farce.

"Yes," Georgette patted her hand in a maternal fashion. "I know that you entered into the betrothal as a mere ruse to keep the gossips at bay, but the more I observe you and Peter together, the more I am convinced that you are a perfect match."

Emma did not know how to reply. Her first impulse was to hoot with indignation—but she did not wish to insult her hostess. Instead, she made an awkward sound—half way between a cough and a sigh—and hoped that would suffice for now.

It did not.

"Oh," Georgette rolled her eyes dramatically, "I know that you think you don't like Peter, but I saw you both at the ball cooing at each other like a pair of turtle doves. And, I might add, tonight you were more than a little jealous that Peter's attentions were focused on Lady Thornton."

"How did you know?" Emma whispered, mortification staining her cheeks.

"Because Lord Sandby is not that funny," Georgette said grimly. "Now, as long as my darling son doesn't do anything to muck things up, I rather think a short engagement would be for the best."

With that, Georgette turned her attentions away from Emma and back to her guests. The men rejoined the ladies in the drawing room a half an hour later, filling the air with the smell of cheroot smoke and brandy. The Duke was not with them, Mr Pews explained, because he had been called away by the butler.

"Probably sorting out some argument amongst the staff," the Vicar had whispered cheerfully to Emma.

He's probably gone to bed, Emma though mulishly, and decided that she would do the same. She politely made her excuses to Georgette and retired hastily from the room.

The layout of Pevensey Manor was quite different from any other house Emma had stayed in and twice she lost her way. Her confusion was the reason that she did not immediately scream when she opened the door to her bed-chamber to find a man with his back to her riffling through her luggage.

Perhaps I have the wrong room? She thought for a moment, but then she spotted her favourite shawl draped across the bed, and new that she did not. The man then turned, so that even in the dim light his profile was visible, and Emma knew at once who it was.

The fiend.

"Are you looking for something in particular?" she called out, startling the Duke. "If you tell me what it is you are looking for, I might be able to assist you with finding it."

"This isn't what it seems," Liscarroll replied quickly, stepping out from corner where he was cast in shadows, to stand before the fireplace.

"Oh, that's good," Emma replied archly, "Because it seems like you are rifling through my possessions. Is that *not* what you were doing?"

"Alright," the Duke ran an agitated hand through his hair, "It is what it seems—but hear me out."

"Hear you out?" Emma replied hotly, "I should throw you out on your ear. Do you know what a scandal you could cause by being here? And there's no need to tell me what it is you were doing, I know perfectly well you're looking for the pistol you think I used to try and murder you."

"Did you?" Liscarroll gave her a pained look. "Did you try to kill me? Lady Thornton pointed out to me just how close you and Lord Sandby appear to be, and I know what it feels like to want to exact revenge on the man who had ruined a beloved father."

"You didn't ruin him," Emma said after a pause, "Oh, you bankrupted him alright, but you did not ruin him. My father was a true gentleman, who lived his live with dignity until he took his very last breath. He was more of a gentleman than you'll ever be."

"Emma, I—" Liscarroll began to speak but Emma cut him off with a wave of her hand.

"To answer your question," she continued, as calmly as she could. "I did not try to kill you, but all you have is my word—and that's obviously not good enough."

"Please, I—" Liscarroll attempted to speak again, but Emma was in no mood to listen.

"Leave," she interrupted him, "Before someone finds you here."

The Duke might have been an ignorant dolt, but at least he knew when to give up. He hesitated momentarily, but mercifully left

without protest. Once the door had closed behind him, Emma flung herself onto her bed, hot tears of anger and shame staining her cheeks.

Oh, why had she gone along with Lord Sandby's plan to make the Duke jealous? She had fallen right into Lady Thornton's clutches by acting like such a green girl. What was worse than her regret, however, was the awful realisation that what hurt the most was that Liscarroll doubted her.

Think of all the times you said that you did not even like him, a voice in her head mocked gleefully, don't you look foolish now? Emma, who was certain her heart would break with the pain of it, could only agree.

#

Chapter Fifteen

Lud, he was a fool. Peter didn't need to be told how much of a fool he was, but judging by his mother's expression, she was about to do just that.

"Oh, you are a foolish boy," Georgette exclaimed as she barged into the library the next morning.

"Could you please give us a minute," Peter called over to Humpreys, who was busy examining the Papyrus of Anni in the corner.

"Of course, Your Grace," the librarian said, exiting the room with great speed.

Once the door had closed behind him, Peter waved his hand, indicating for his mother to continue. Thank goodness I'm sitting down, he thought, as Georgette launched into a ten minute monologue on all of his shortcomings as a man.

"For goodness sake," she finished with a look of despair, "How could you let that awful Lady Thornton manipulate you so? It was as plain as the nose on your face that Emma was merely trying to catch your attention—but your pride allowed you to be manipulated into thinking that it was all part of a murder plot. You silly, silly boy."

"Well, what else was I to think?" Peter asked, feeling rather hot under the collar. It was one thing to know how stupid one had been, it was quite another to have it pointed out in great detail. Also, he was not a boy, he was a Duke for heaven's sake!

"You could at least have credited the girl with a brain," Georgette retorted, taking the seat opposite Peter's. "Do you really think that if she was in cahoots with Sandby, that she would flaunt the fact so blatantly?"

"No," Peter admitted petulantly. He knew that he had been a prize idiot and that he had reacted to Lady Thornton's suggestive whispers in just the way that Arabella had wanted. He had once prided himself as being a man who could foresee the outcome of any situation, but when it came to Lady Emma Percival, he completely lost his head.

"We'll just have to hope that you haven't caused too much damage," Georgette said with a sigh.

"Is she very angry?"

"No, much worse than that. She's very hurt," his mother said gently.

Oh, Lud, Peter thought, that was much, much worse.

"What should I do?" he asked, hoping that Georgette might know a secret, female trick for remedying such matters.

"Heaven knows," she said, shaking her head in despair. "You got yourself into this mess, my Sweet-Pea, you can get yourself out of it."

With those words of wisdom, his mother took her leave. Once the door had closed behind her, Peter swore violently. He was so annoyed with himself for behaving like such a perfect donkey and allowing Arabella to manipulate him in such an obvious manner. She was the person he had most suspected and yet, with one glance at Emma giggling at Sandby's joke, a red mist of rage had descended upon the rational part of his brain.

She may never forgive me, he realised with a jolt and, even worse, he could understand why could not. Would he, if he were in Emma's position, turn the other cheek? He left that question unanswered, though in his soul he knew the truth. There was no point in ruminating however, not when he had a would be killer to catch.

"I say," Colonel Bowers said, "What a wonderful game-keeper you have, Liscarroll. I've never returned from a hunt with such an abundance of game in my life."

"The staff are very attentive," Peter conceded, not mentioning that the proliferation of game in the surrounding area was due mostly to the fact that he rarely hunted. When he rode, he preferred to take his horse on a proper, cross country gallop, and thus had no time to stop and shoot at unsuspecting pheasants.

Poor things, he thought idly as he eyed the dozen or so birds that Bowers had killed, hanging over the stablehand's saddle.

The six men—Liscarroll, Bowers, Pews, Sandby, Lord Abraham and his brother Jack—had spent the best part of the afternoon hunting the grounds surrounding Pevensey Manor. The lush downs were filled with wildlife, including large herds of deer, but the men had decided to focus on smaller targets.

Peter had hoped to gauge Lord Sandby's shooting skills during the outing, but the Earl had lagged behind the group, looking rather unsteady on his mount.

"Not much for hunting, Sandby?"

The group were headed back to the Manor and Peter had slowed Hermes to a slow trot to allow the Earl to catch up with him.

"Not much for riding at all, I'm afraid," Sandby replied with a tight smile. Peter could see that Sandby was gripping his reins so tightly that the knuckles of his hands were white. A sheen of sweat covered the Earl's forehead, despite the gentle pace at which he rode.

"Why's that?" Peter asked curiously. He had often spotted the Earl parading along The Row on Hermes and had never once thought the man looked nervous.

"Took a bad fall a few years back when a horse bolted unexpectedly," Sandby replied grimly. "It took me ages to work up the courage to get back in the saddle, and I only did because my brother gave me Hermes. He's wonderful with horses and promised me that Hermes had the steadiest of natures—which he has. Then I went and ruddy lost him to you at the card tables."

Peter digested this piece of information in silence. So, it was the loss of Hermes, rather than the estate he had also gambled away, that irked the Earl the most.

"That day, in the park," Peter began, but could not finish as the Earl interrupted him.

"Yes," he said looking embarrassed. "Gosh, I've been meaning to apologise to you about that. My groomsman took me out early, so that I could try out a new stallion whilst the park was quiet. The ruddy thing saw a squirrel and took off. I, of course, panicked and did nothing—I just held on for dear life. Terribly sorry about that."

"It's perfectly understandable, now you have explained it," Peter replied truthfully, for it was. It would seem that all the animosity that he thought Sandby felt toward him had merely been a figment of his own imagination. The chap was really rather nice underneath it all.

"Gosh, between me trying to run you down with a horse and then someone shooting you a few days later, you must have thought I really had it in for you," the Earl said with a guffaw of laughter.

"You didn't try to shoot me then?" Peter asked awkwardly.

"Heavens no," Sandby laughed again. "Lud, I get all my coats from Weston himself, I wouldn't like to ruin one by doing something

as stupid as shooting a man and getting it covered in blood."

Strangely enough, Peter believed him. There was something so unselfconscious about the way that Sandby spoke that Peter knew he wasn't telling a bouncer, but was speaking the truth.

"No, one wouldn't want to ruin a Weston," Peter agreed. Though, his valet would attest that the Duke had managed to ruin dozens of coats made by the prestigious tailor during various nights on the town.

The pair returned to Pevensey Manor, chatting amiably about life, parliament and the general goings on of the *bon ton*. Once they reached the estates' impressive stables, Sandby awkwardly dismounted his stallion in such a comical manner that Peter had to keep himself from laughing. The Earl was about to leave, when Peter called out to him.

"I say," he said quietly, "I know it was not you who tried to shoot me, but do you think, perhaps, that Lady Thornton did? We parted on bad terms and her last words to me involved a detailed threat to my person."

"It wasn't Arabella," the Earl replied cagily, his eyes looking past Peter and into the distance. "I can't tell you how I know, you'll just have to take my word for it."

With that, Lord Sandby left with a curt bow, disappearing across the yard toward the Manor with great haste. Well, Peter thought, if ever a man was going to warn someone about something, it was Lord Sandby. Peter gave the Earl a few seconds of a head start, then began to follow him.

The Earl headed in the direction of the *piano nobile* of the east wing, where Lady Thornton had been given a suite of rooms. Peter waited on the last step of the staircase until he heard Arabella answer the door to Lord Sandby.

"Well, don't just stand there," he heard her say with annoyance, "Come in."

Once he heard the door click, Peter tip-toed down the corridor and pressed his ear to the keyhole. He was afraid that he might not be able to hear anything, but luckily Arabella was in a foul temper and had raised her voice accordingly.

"I've told you that I don't care if he thinks I am the one who tried to shoot him," Arabella cried in a loud voice, "I would rather he think that, than know the truth."

"You can't possibly—" Peter heard Sandby say in reply, but his voice dropped to a low murmur that made it impossible for him to distinguish what the Earl was saying.

Drat, Peter thought, but then, thankfully Arabella began to shout in earnest.

"Do you honestly think that Liscarroll would keep it a secret if we told him?" she wailed, "If you said anything to him, the whole *ton* would know within an hour that we were tupping in the broom closet when that maniac shot at him. No, I won't let you tell him—I would rather rot in Newgate than be the laughing stock of all of London."

Tupping in the broom closet? It took all of Peter's willpower not to burst out laughing, but somehow he resisted the urge. It would not do to be found rolling around on the corridor by Lady Thornton—for she would surely kill him, if she knew that he had overheard.

Gingerly, Peter rose from his hunkered position by the door and tip-toed back down the corridor. What he had overheard might have given him a laugh, but it did not lead him any closer to finding the perpetrator of the crime.

"Oh, Humphreys," Peter said, as he entered the library. He had forgotten that the librarian would be there, examining the Papyrus of Ani.

"Your Grace," Humphreys stood in greeting, pushing his spectacles up his bulbous nose.

"How goes it?" Peter waved a hand toward the table, where the ancient text was spread out. His voice must have belied his disinterest, for Humphreys simply murmured a few platitudes and sat back down to work.

The men sat in silence for a few minutes, while Peter sipped on the generous brandy he had poured himself and Humphreys worked quietly in the corner. Peter was mulling over the afternoon's events, when the librarian cleared his throat, indicating he wished to speak.

"Yes?" Peter asked, glancing over at the older man.

"I was just wondering how your investigations are going?" the librarian asked, then continued in a flustered tone; "Not that it is any of my business, of course, but it's all terribly thrilling to an old man like myself."

"Not many murders in the Bodleian then?" he asked, his lips twitching with mirth at the idea of bloodshed in the sedate settings of The Bod.

Humphreys ruefully shook his head in response, his expression almost disappointed.

"It goes well enough," Peter continued, "In that I have eliminated two of my suspects completely."

"Oh?" Humphreys raised an eyebrow.

"Lord Sandby and Lady Thornton were otherwise engaged at the time of the attack," Peter said, but did not elaborate any further. He would not reveal Arabella's secret—even though it was more than she deserved.

"So, that leaves the maid Anouk and—"

"My betrothed," Peter finished for the man, for he had turned a shade of scarlet as he realised that he could not possibly accuse Emma of anything in front of the Duke.

"Well, I don't think that Lady Emma had anything at all to do with it," Humphreys said indignantly, "But, nor do I think the maid has either. I was speaking with her just now, in the kitchens, and she seems perfectly amiable to me."

"Amiable?" Peter snorted, "That's not what I've heard. But, we must disregard her social skills and focus on the fact that the girl has no motive whatsoever. Which leaves me in the ha'penny place; if none of my suspects tried to kill me, then just who did?"

"That is a problem," Humphreys sighed in reply.

The gong sounded, indicating that dinner would soon be served.

"Goodness," Humphreys started at the sound. "Is that the time? I suppose we'd best put this away."

Peter opened the top drawer of his desk and removed the key for the door of the dark room, where he kept all his father's old manuscripts. The room was situated just off the library and had no windows, so the sun's rays could not damage the ancient papers within.

"I'd best go make myself decent," Peter said, once the manuscript was safely stored away.

He left, taking the steps two at a time to his bed-chamber, where his valet was waiting to dress him for the evening. Once suitably attired in a bottle-green coat made of superfine and a neck-cloth tied in the Waterfall style, Peter headed downstairs to the dining room. On his way, he was met by Heyer, the butler, who wore a worried expression on his lined face.

"Your Grace," Heyer stammered, once he saw him, "I've come to tell you that two of the gardeners have reported seeing a strange man lurking on the grounds earlier. They chased him off, but with everything that has happened, I thought I should let you know."

"Thank you, Heyer," Peter replied gratefully, "If there are any more reports of this man lurking, come fetch me at once."

His guests were milling about the drawing room when Peter arrived, chattering idly amongst themselves. Peter spotted Arabella and Lord Sandby whispering together by the fireplace and, judging by their closeness, they seemed to have rekindled their affair.

Emma, he saw, was engaged in conversation with Colonel Bowers. Her back was to him, but by the way her shoulders stiffened, he knew that she had noted his entrance to the room. He could almost see the muscles in her neck working, such was the effort it took her not to turn her head to look at him.

She'll have to look at me during dinner, Peter thought, for he had

instructed his mother to place Emma beside him.

After a few more minutes chatter, dinner was announced, and each gentleman took the arm of the nearest lady to escort her into the dining room.

Peter's hopes that he would be able to engage Emma in conversation over dinner were immediately dashed, when she plonked herself into Lady Thornton's allocated seat, in a most unladylike manner.

"I hope you don't mind, my Lady," she said in a false sugary tone, "But Colonel Bowers was telling me the most fascinating story about his time in India."

Balderdash, Peter thought. He had heard all of the old Colonel's stories about India, and not one of them could be considered fascinating. He could not protest, so instead he sent Emma a meaningful look, which she returned with a quick scowl.

It was miserable, watching her avidly listening to the Colonel for three courses, when he knew that she was hurting inside. Hurting because of his actions. To the outside eye, she probably appeared her usual self, but Peter could tell from her too-bright eyes and the tight smile that she wore, that Emma would rather be anywhere else but in a room with him.

The wretchedness he felt had dimmed his appetite, so much so, that when the fish course was served, Peter could not even contemplate eating his salmon. His guests were happily hammering at the crab they had been served, a delicacy that Peter himself could not touch for it made him violently ill. When he was certain they were all otherwise engaged, he lifted the salmon *darne* from his plate and fed it to the house cat who was sitting at his feet. Mr Pews, who was sitting to his right was the only person to see what he had done. The handsome vicar made a pious face at wasting such a nice cut of fish on a cat, but Peter ignored him.

Sanctimonious poopinjay, he thought, as he took a deep sip from his wine glass.

The footmen had just arrived to serve dessert, when an awful, keening wail brought the room halted all conversation.

"Lud, that sounds like a banshee," Colonel Bower's deep, baritone voice broke the silence.

Indeed, the sickening sound was almost other-worldly and, Peter realised with alarm, it was coming from beneath his feet.

Peter pushed back his chair and looked down, aghast to find the poor, house-cat writhing and screeching at his feet. The poor creature seemed to be in terrible pain and was frothing at the mouth. Peter had just resolved to fetch his pistol and put the poor thing out of its misery when the noise came to an abrupt stop.

"It's dead," Mr Pews said his face ghostly pale. "Your Grace, that salmon that you fed it must have been poisoned."

The room was filled with gasps and shouts of surprise, though they were not so loud that he could not hear his mother disapprovingly say; "Oh, Peter. What have I told you about feeding the cats at the table?".

"Lud, woman," Colonel Bowers bellowed, "Now is not the time for lectures on table manners—someone has tried to poison the Duke!"

#

Chapter Sixteen

For the first time in her life, Emma felt as though she was going to faint. A loud ringing filled her ears and while she could see her fellow guests' mouths moving, she could not hear the words they were saying.

Fear filled her every sense.

Never before, in all her three and twenty years, had Emma felt such terror. Someone had tried to poison Peter, *her* Peter. It was only a happy accident that he still stood there, living, breathing—though ghostly pale—and was not dead upon the floor, like the poor cat.

All of the anger that she had been holding had left her in an instant and she longed to cross the room and throw herself into his arms. She yearned to press her ear against his chest, so that she could hear the steady, comforting beat of his heart—because she loved him. The realisation struck her so sharply, that she longed to shout out and tell him just how she felt.

Of course, she could not. Instead, she shook herself from her dazed trance, and focused on what was happening.

"Who would do such a thing, in the man's own home?" Lord Abraham called out.

"I assume the same person who tried to kill me in my London home," the Duke replied grimly.

The noise of the guests had brought the servants streaming into the dining room, with Heyer the butler at the fore.

"Your Grace," the old man's voice quivered with anger, "I have just heard. I will line up each and every member of the kitchen staff and demand that whoever committed such a vile act confess at once."

"Thank you, Heyer," the Duke replied, "But I fear that it was not a member of the kitchen staff who tried to poison me, for none of them were present in London on the night of the shooting."

More murmured whispers went up and Emma caught Lady Thornton giving her a sideways glance.

"If I may, Your Grace," the hesitant voice of Mr Humphreys the librarian piped up. "Perhaps a search of the house is in order?"

"Jolly good idea, man," Colonel Bowers bellowed in agreement. "No one will object, unless they have something to hide."

As he had been so vocal in his support for the idea, Colonel Bowers' room was the first to be searched. The guests then made their way to Lady Thornton's suites, where she audibly complained that she did not like the idea of anyone rummaging through her unmentionables.

"I don't know why," Georgette whispered to Emma, "Half of London has seen her unmentionables."

Despite the gravity of the situation, Emma gave a smile. It was only as the search of the rooms continued, yielding nothing of interest, that Emma began to feel true fear. They had just finished searching the rooms of Lord Abraham and his brother, when Lady Thornton spoke.

"Just one room left to search," she said, with a sly glance at Emma. "Surely we must find something there?"

The last room to be searched, as Lady Thornton well knew, was Emma's own. She flushed as she felt the other guests give her a curious look.

No need to be so afraid, she told herself, you have nothing to hide.

Indeed, the search of her room yielded little. Heyer, the butler, checked the nooks and crannies, whilst Mrs Hodges, the housekeeper, searched through Emma's more private articles.

"Perhaps all this will have been for nothing," the Duke said with, Emma thought, a hint of relief, but he had no sooner finished speaking when Mrs Hodges gave a shout from the dressing room.

"Your Grace," she called, "Come quick!"

Liscarroll gave Emma an impenetrable look and followed the housekeeper's voice into the small dressing room. The guests, each wearing serious expressions—bar Lady Thornton, who looked thrilled—all followed him and crowded around the door outside.

"I found it amongst the lotions and potions," Mrs Hodges said, handing a dark, green bottle to the Duke.

"Extract of Hemlock," he read the lable aloud, before holding the bottle up for the room to see.

Whispers turned into murmurs before each and every accusing eye turned toward Emma in question.

"I, I don't know where that came from," she stuttered, panic beginning to build. She had never seen the bottle before in her life

and, besides, all the lotions and potions belonged to...

"Anouk," she gasped, as realisation dawned upon her. "All of those bottles belong to my Lady's Maid."

"A likely story," Lady Thornton called, her almond eyes narrowed in suspicion. "What reason would she have for wanting the Duke dead? You, on the other hand had a very good reason—revenge!"

"That's enough Arabella."

Liscarroll's voice was sharp as a whip crack and his face was like thunder. He stepped between Emma and Lady Thornton, acting as a physical barrier against the woman's vitriol.

"Emma did not try to kill me," he continued, much to Emma's relief, "I would more believe that someone had planted this bottle in her room as a means to frame her. However, I fear that my would-be assassin has already fled the scene of the crime and did not care what evidence she left behind. Heyer, check the top floor for Anouk. Emma, check and see if anything is missing."

Emma duly complied with his command, happy to be able to turn away from the other guests' faces, some of which still showed vestiges of doubt.

She opened her jewellery box, which was small enough by most people's standards and found that the sapphire bracelet the Duke had gifted her was missing.

"My bracelet," she cried, turning to Liscarroll in shock.

"I suspected as much," he said with a sigh, "Ladies, may I ask you to check your rooms again to ensure that nothing else is missing."

Each woman filed out of the room quickly, to check that nothing of their own had been taken, all, that is, bar Georgette, who hesitated by the door.

"I just don't understand why the girl tried to kill you," she said in confusion.

"Quite possible as a means to create a diversion whilst she pilfered your guests' belongings," Humphreys said speculatively.

"Ruddy French," Colonel Bowers added, "Can't be trusted at all."

Satisfied by Humphreys' theory, Georgette left the room. No sooner had she left than Heyer reappeared, panting a little with exertion.

"She's not in her room, Your Grace," he said, his voice filled with admiration for the Duke's perceptive powers.

"How did you know?" Emma asked, turning to Liscarroll as the men in the room began to chatter with excitement.

"Well," he said modestly, "Humphreys had mentioned that he was speaking with Anouk earlier in the kitchen. I guessed that she must have overheard one of the kitchen staff saying that the salmon was for me, due to my intolerance for shellfish. Though, truly, this only

clicked into place in my mind when the bottle was found in your room. I may sometimes be a stupid man, Emma, but I knew—in my soul, I knew—that the bottle could not have belonged to you."

"Oh, Peter," Emma whispered, tears welling up in her eyes. "You are a clever, clever man."

"Say that again," he whispered.

"You are a clever—" she began, but he cut her off with a wave of his hand.

"Not that," he grinned, "My name. I have never heard a sweeter sound, than my name upon your lips."

If they had not been surrounded by half a dozen men, who included one vicar, Emma would have flung herself into Peter's arms. As it was, the half dozen men were all looking straight at them and so she settled instead for blushing so violently that she could feel the tips of her ears burning.

"My dear, I think you're blushing," Liscarroll jested, "Either that or you are about to transform into a tomato."

"Blushing?" Emma quickly retorted, "I think not, my dear. Your eyes must be giving out in your old age."

Liscarroll grinned in response at the return of her usual, sparky humour.

"Nice to see that this evening's events haven't overly upset you," he deadpanned, before turning to the assembled guests.

"Gentlemen, I feel that none of us should remain any longer in Lady Emma's bedchamber, lest we want to start the scandal of the century. Shall we retire to the drawing room for refreshments?"

"Jolly good idea," Colonel Bowers called.

"You can finish regaling Lady Emma with tales of your Indian adventures," Peter replied with a smile to the old Colonel and a quick, discreet wink to Emma.

Oh, what a beast he was, she thought, holding back a giggle. Colonel Bowers' tales were as dull as they were long, but she would happily endure them for a brief glimpse of the Duke's mischievous smile.

The ladies soon rejoined the gentlemen in the drawing room, each listing the items that were missing from their cases. The poor Countess of Warwickshire, who had previously had most of her jewellery collection stolen by a light-fingered Lady's Maid, had now had all her replacement items taken.

"Oh, my husband will despair at having to replace them again," she wailed to a sympathetic Georgette.

"He will do no such thing," Liscarroll interjected, "I insist that I replace every item you have lost, and those of the other ladies who are also missing pieces."

The ladies protested faintly, but the Duke was adamant. He fetched a few sheafs of paper and instructed each lady write out, in detail, the pieces missing and vowed that they would be replaced in a fortnight.

"You are too kind, Liscarroll," Lady Thornton purred as she handed him a long list, which took up two sheafs of paper.

"You flatter me, my Lady," he said in return, though when he turned to Emma he discreetly rolled his eyes.

Talk soon returned to Anouk, and though some of the gentlemen protested that perhaps the discussion might not be suited for delicate ladies' ears, Peter ignored them.

"Heyer told me just before dinner that a mysterious man was spotted lurking in the gardens," Peter told the room. "It is my guess that Anouk was working with him and that together they have returned to London."

"They both should hang!" Colonel Bowers shouted, but was quietened by a stern look from Georgette, who then gave a second stern look to the footman, which clearly said that the Colonel was not to be served any more brandy.

"Perhaps they will," Liscarroll shrugged, "I will return to London tonight and then immediately set forth to discover where the unscrupulous pair are."

"You can't leave!"

The words were out of Emma's mouth before she even had time to think. Every pair of eyes in the room turned to look her way, startled by her loud outburst.

"I mean," she said, grappling for a reason other than that she did not want him to go, "It might not be safe. What if you meet them somewhere along the London Road?"

"She's right," Lord Abraham gave her an approving nod, though she did not deserve it, "My brother and I will travel alongside you, Liscarroll. Makes no odds to us if we leave now or in the morning."

"Thank you, Abraham," the Duke said, "I suppose we'd best ready ourselves to leave at once."

Again, Emma wanted to shout her protest, but this time she restrained herself.

"I will see you and mother tomorrow," he whispered to her as he passed by, "Have no fear."

With that, Liscarroll, Lord Abraham and his brother Jack Fitzwilliam, swept from the room.

"Well," Georgette said as she patted her hair, "I don't know about anyone else, but I'm fit to drop from exhaustion. If you'll excuse me, I will retire to my room. Thank you all, so much, for your company over the past few days—I am so sorry that our party ended on such a

sour note."

As ever, Georgette's manners were impeccable, but she needn't have apologised for the guests all seemed to have thoroughly enjoyed being part of the scandal of the season, now that it was clear all danger had passed. They each took their lead from the Dowager Duchess and retired one by one to bed. Emma dawdled, hoping that she might be able to steal a word with Liscarroll before he left, but from outside the window, she heard the sound of hoofbeats thundering down the drive.

He's gone, she thought with dismay, for she had not had the chance to tell him just how she felt about him.

#

Chapter Seventeen

Peter returned to Liscarroll House late the next afternoon, exhausted to his very bones.

He had arrived back in London in the small hours of the morning, having ridden straight through the night. After a short nap, he had risen at dawn and set out to search for Anouk. His first stop had been to the Bow Street Magistrate's Office, to engage the services of the Bow Street Runners.

After giving as detailed an account of what had happened and as much information as he could on Anouk, Peter set forth to Lady Jersey's residence, to see what she could tell him about the Lady's Maid.

"Your Grace," Sarah Villiers, Countess of Jersey appeared in the drawing room, a smile pasted onto her beautiful face. "How surprising to have a visitor at this early hour."

Peter was not so stupid that he could not infer what Lady Jersey meant by "surprising". Manners dictated that morning calls should take place no earlier than eleven o'clock, and that the caller should not barge past a butler who had declared the mistress of the house to be "not at home". Peter had ignored both these rules and had relied instead on the fact that his title allowed him to, mostly, do as he pleased.

Judging from Lady Jersey's hair, which was not as elegantly coiffed as usual, and her dress, which was buttoned the wrong way at the bodice, Peter's surprising visit had roused the Countess from bed.

"I do apologise for the early hour," Peter said without a hint of apology in his voice, "But I'm afraid it's rather an urgent matter."

"Oh?" Lady Jersey raised an eyebrow with interest. Peter knew that she would forgive him any social faux pas if he furnished her with the inside details on the latest of scandals.

"It's about the Lady's Maid that you wrote a recommendation for."

"The girl who showed up at the Countess of Warwickshire's home?" Lady Jersey frowned in annoyance, "How many times must I repeat the fact that the girl forged my name upon that letter. I had never set eyes upon the creature in my life!"

"Not that Lady's Maid," Peter interrupted, not wishing to allow Lady Jersey time to vent her spleen about her involvement in that scandal. "I have come about Anouk. Did you, or did you not, recommend her to my mother?"

"Why," Lady Jersey looked confused. "Yes, I did recommend her. Anouk was a wonderful Lady's Maid during the time she worked for me."

"I'm afraid that during her time working for my betrothed she has been anything but wonderful," Peter muttered in response. "In fact, last night she attempted to murder me, then made off with the contents of my guests' jewellery cases."

"I don't believe you," Lady Jersey cried in response and truly, Peter thought, she did seem completely taken aback by his accusations.

"Oh, but it's true," Peter shrugged away her horror, "She disappeared after the act, my guess is that she and her accomplice returned to London to try and fence their stolen items."

"Oh," Lady Jersey put a weary hand to her temple, "I am ruined if my name is associated with another thieving maid."

"I'll make certain that no one knows of the fact except me and my mother," Peter replied, amused that Lady Jersey's primary concern was her reputation and not his health. "Is there anything that you can tell me about Anouk? Anything at all? Does she have family nearby?"

"I don't know," Lady Jersey sniffed, "She left my employment about nine months ago, to go to look after her ailing mother in Islington. Yes, I think Islington is what she said. I had not heard a peep from her, until a few weeks ago when she wrote, explaining that her mother was now well and that she was seeking another position. I would have rehired her, but the new girl Sarah, was working out so well, that I hadn't the heart to let her go. Luckily, your mother began making enquiries about hiring a girl for Lady Emma Percival and I was able to recommend Anouk."

"Yes, how lucky," Peter agreed, though Lady Jersey seemed to miss his pointed irony.

"Oh, I do hope this doesn't end up in the papers," she wailed.

"Not if I can help it," Peter said reassuringly, before rising to leave. "My thanks, my Lady, for your help."

As quickly as he could, Peter left and returned to Bow Street to inform the Runners of what he had learned.

"I doubt she's returned to Islington," one of the officers said dubiously, "But rest assured, Your Grace, we'll check straight away."

"Thank you," Peter replied. He would have gone across the river to search the borough himself, but, like the officer, Peter doubted that Anouk was to be found there. Instead, he decided to return to Liscarroll House, so that he could be there when his mother and Emma arrived.

Emma.

Just the thought of her filled his heart with warmth. Her unexpected outburst the night before had soothed his frayed nerves. She had not wanted him to leave—the memory left him giddy. Murder attempts make the heart grow fonder, he thought to himself with a wry smile as he continued on his way to St James' Square.

Liscarroll House was quiet upon his return, so Peter rightly assumed that his mother had not yet returned. Feeling at a loose end, he made his way to the library for a quick brandy to warm his bones and was surprised to find Humphreys there, working away in the corner.

"Oh, hullo," Peter said, coming to a halt by the door. "I wasn't expecting anyone to be back yet."

"Your Grace," the librarian stood in greeting. "Forgive me, I woke early and so left early. Your mother and Lady Emma were to leave at noon."

Noon? Peter swallowed a sigh. That meant that they quite possibly wouldn't be back until well past dusk, given his mother's preference for sedate carriage rides.

"Have you had any luck locating the girl?" Humphreys questioned, as Peter poured himself a brandy.

"I met with Lady Jersey, who indicated that she had family in Islington," Peter replied, before taking a grateful sip of his drink. "The chances of her having returned there are slim, according to the Runners."

"Oh, but you must go and see," Humphreys replied with excitement. "It would be a shame if she managed to escape again."

"If she is there, the officers from Bow Street will come fetch me," Peter replied with a shrug; he did not take kindly to people telling him what to do. "In the meantime, I shall put my feet up and rest. It's been rather a trying experience."

"Oh, of course, Your Grace," Humphreys replied ingratiatingly,

having obviously realised how far out of line he had stepped. "If it is alright with you, I shall continue my work."

"Go ahead," Peter waved a careless hand, then drew a pile of correspondences that had been left on his desk toward him. He worked quietly for about a half an hour, reading letters from his various agents and assigning them into piles which required follow up. It was just before lunch when a knock came at the door and a footman announced the arrival of Lord Amberford.

"Deuce, Amberford," Peter stood as his friend barrelled through the door. "I wasn't expecting you back in Town for weeks. Pray tell, how is your mother?"

"She's fine," the Marquess ran a distressed hand through his hair. "I arrived at Newcastle to find that the letter was a hoax. My mother is in perfect health."

"Lud, who would do such a thing?" Peter questioned; Amberford was an affable sort, not the type to accrue enemies like Peter was.

"I don't know, but I can't help but feel it has something to do with everything that's happened lately," Amberford replied seriously, "Tell me, have you made any more progress?"

"Oodles," Peter replied sarcastically and proceeded to explain to his friend all that had transpired during the trip to Sussex.

"So, you are just waiting for news from the Runners?" Amberford questioned, as Peter concluded his tale. He had no sooner nodded his head, than the footman reappeared announcing the arrival of the Magistrate, Mr Bleakly and one of his officers.

"Your Grace," Mr Bleakly said reverentially, once he was led into the room. "We have apprehended your suspect and she seems most keen to cooperate with us. May I request that you assist us with questioning her?"

"No need to request," Peter said, jumping up from his desk. "I'd be more than happy to hear what this ruddy French girl has to say for herself."

He followed the Magistrate outside, quickly followed by Lord Amberford. Once the groomsmen had saddled Hermes for him, Peter, Amberford and the men from Bow Street set forth for Islington.

Something niggled at Peter for the entire duration of the ride; his senses were telling him there was something wrong with the entire scenario. If Anouk was part of a criminal gang, surely she would not have been so stupid as to return to her home? She must have known that the attempted murder of anyone would be thoroughly investigated—never mind a Duke!

The parish of Islington was located north of town, and the city streets soon gave way to sleepy, pastoral scenes. Mr Bleakly led them to a small row of thatched cottages, just on the outskirts of the small

village of Islington. It was easy to imagine farm labourers and their families living there, not a murderess.

"You'll find her inside," Bleakly said, gesturing for Peter and Lord Amberford to follow him inside.

The front door led immediately into a large room, which served as a kitchen, dining and parlour room. A fire burned cheerfully in the grate and at the kitchen table, looking more amused than anything else, was Anouk with a baby in her arms.

"Your Grace," she said, looking up from the gurgling babe she held. "I 'ear you think I tried to kill you."

"Er," Peter, who had been bracing himself for a fraught confrontation, replied. "Didn't you?"

"Non," Anouk pouted with annoyance, "Why on earth would I want to kill you?"

It was the question his mother had asked, only the night before, and one that Peter had been ruminating upon on his way here. While all the evidence had pointed to Anouk, it simply didn't make any sense.

"To steal my guests' jewels," Peter countered, without much conviction behind his words.

"I 'ave not stolen anything," the French girl replied with outrage. "Oui, I lied and did not tell your mother I was married with a child, but it was only because my 'usband 'as not been able to work since he broke 'is arm in an accident."

Lud, Peter thought as he took a seat opposite the Lady's Maid, would this saga ever reach a conclusion?

"Can you please, please explain, exactly what led you to disappearing last night, just after someone attempted to poison me?"

"I would be delighted," Anouk replied with a sniff and proceeded to tell her tale. She had left the employ of Lady Jersey when she had discovered she was with child. Her husband, who had delivered the vegetables to Lord and Lady Jersey's home, had brought her here to Islington to live.

"Everything was going so well," Anouk continued, "Until 'arry broke 'is arm. He was unable to work and so we decided that I would go back into employment for a few months, so that we would not lose the roof above our heads."

"Of course," Peter prompted, hoping that if he adopted an understanding tone she might get to the point more quickly.

"Lady Jersey wrote letter of recommendation for me to your Mother," Anouk continued, "And the position with Lady Emma sounded ideal. I would stay in Town for a few months and 'arry would be able to bring ze baby to see me from time to time."

"So, that was where you disappeared to the night of the ball?"

"Oui," Anouk nodded, "I did not think I would be missed. When Lady Emma said we were to go to Sussex, I was most distraught. Mary had been poorly for the past week and I did not wish to be so far away from her."

"So, what was it that made you disappear from Pevensey Manor?"

"Mary," Anouk cast a doting looking at her daughter who was, even Peter could admit, a beautiful baby.

"Yesterday she was so poorly that ze doctor feared she may not live through ze night," Anouk continued, her voice catching a little at the memory of it all. "'Arry sent one of our neighbours down to fetch me so I could be with her."

The strange man lurking on the grounds, Peter thought with a jolt of realisation.

"When he told me what was happening, I did not have ze time to explain it all to Lady Emma," Anouk said, "But I asked zat Mr Humphreys to explain where I had gone, when I met him on my way out ze kitchen door."

"Humphreys knew where you were headed?" Peter asked, as he was overcome by a bout of dizziness.

"Oui," Anouk shrugged simply, "So, you may ask him why he caused so much upset by not telling you about zis."

"Oh, I'll ask him alright," Peter said grimly, pushing his chair back from the table and standing up. "Thank you for your help, Anouk."

Without waiting for a reply, Peter rushed from the kitchen with Lord Amberford hot on his heels.

"Lud," Amberford said, "When I see Humphreys, I'll give him a piece of my mind. Doesn't matter if he's gone a bit doddery in his old age, a chap can't forget to pass on a message as important as that."

"You did see Humphreys," Peter replied, stopping his long strides to turn and look at his friend. "Just a few hours ago in the library."

"No," Peter felt a growing sense of unease as his friend shook his head in confusion, before replying; "I've no idea who that man was, but he wasn't Arnold Humphreys."

#

Chapter Eighteen

"I love you."

Emma burst through the door of the library in Liscarroll House, not caring that one of the servants might be there to hear her

declaration to the Duke. However, once she entered the room, she found that the only person present to hear her profess her love, was the librarian, Mr Humphreys.

"Oh, Mr Humphreys," she said, flushing with embarrassment. "I didn't mean I love *you.* I thought that His Grace might be...what *are* you doing?"

Emma stopped speaking and stared with incredulity at the librarian, as he stuffed a number of manuscripts into a bag. On the table next to him, lay a pile of jewellery in which she could spot her sapphire bracelet twinkling innocently in the afternoon sun.

"Mr Humphreys!" Emma cried, so shocked that her mind was momentarily unable to put together the pieces of the puzzle before her. In the instant that it clicked together, she let out a gasp, which caused Mr Humphreys to turn toward her.

"Sit down there," he snarled, snatching a pistol from the table beside him and pointing it at her.

Emma duly complied. Liscarroll had once told her she was stupidly obstinate, but even she knew when to obey an order.

"Were you and Anouk working together all this time?" she questioned, as Mr Humphreys added his pile of stolen jewels to the manuscripts in his bag.

"No," he snapped in reply, as he tied the bag shut. "I mean, stay quiet. I need to listen out for my carriage. Did you come alone?"

"Her Grace preferred to return to her abode in Mayfair," Emma replied evenly, sounding, for all the world, as though they were in the midst of a perfectly polite conversation. "She wished to check on her cats."

"Mmm," Humphreys grunted, stepping toward the window so that he could peer through the drapes and out onto the square. Sensing that his attention was elsewhere, Emma slowly rose from her chair, fully intending to make a dash for the door, so she that could alert the staff to the thief in their midst.

"Don't even think about it."

Humphreys turned, his eyes fixed on Emma, who was frozen in a half-crouched position. He crossed the room, pistol in hand and grabbed her by the elbow.

"If there is a single peep out of you, I won't hesitate to put a bullet in your head."

"Wouldn't that make rather a lot of noise as well?" Emma wondered aloud.

Apparently, Humphreys had no time for back-chat, for he delivered a resounding slap to her cheek with the back of his hand.

"I don't care if it makes noise," he hissed, his hand gripping her arm so tightly that she could feel his nails digging into her skin. "It

would be worth it to shut your cheeky mouth forever—now, hush."

Humphreys dragged her across the room, back toward the window, which he again peered out of. He must have seen something good, for he gave a grunt of excitement, before turning to look at Emma with dismay.

"Lud," he groaned, "I'll have to take you with me."

"Oh, don't feel you must," Emma protested, as politely as she could.

"Of course I must," Humphreys growled. "If I leave you here, someone will find you soon enough and then you'll open that pretty mouth of yours and everyone will know it was I who tried to kill the Duke."

As much as she wanted to, Emma could not argue with the villain's reasoning. All she could do, she decided, was to try to remain as calm as possible, then try to escape when the opportunity arose.

Having a plan helped to soothe her frazzled nerves and quieten the hammering of her heart in her chest. She remained quiet as, on Humphreys' instruction, she followed him into the entrance hall. A part of her had hoped that at least one of the retinue of servants the Duke kept would be milling about, but alas they were not.

Humphreys, with one hand still clutching her by the arm, and the other holding the pistol and his bag of loot, dragged her through the hallway and out the front door. Once on the steps of Liscarroll House, he let go of her arm as he peered around the empty square. Emma's relief at being freed was short lived, however, for she soon felt the hard barrel of his pistol pressed into the small of her back.

"Get in the carriage," the librarian murmured, "And don't make any sudden moves—I wouldn't like to ruin that pretty dress of yours."

Emma obeyed and hurried down the steps, opening the door of the hackney carriage which had stopped just outside the door. She had never been in a hired-cab in all her life and she balked a little at the smell of it and the torn material of the seats. Humphreys hauled himself in behind her and made to close the door but the driver, a ruffian out of The Seven Dials no doubt, held it open and leered in at the librarian.

"I'll be wanting payment up front, Barnaby," the driver said, revealing a mouth full of missing teeth as he spoke.

"Lud, alright," Humphreys—or rather Barnaby—replied, reaching into his bag and snatching out the first item he found. Emma watched with annoyance as Barnaby handed her sapphire bracelet over to the ruffian, who snatched it with a dirty hand.

"Wot's this then?" he asked dubiously, as he squinted at the bracelet.

"Sixteen sapphires set in gold filigree," Emma replied with a sniff.

"And two diamonds upon the clasp."

"Awight, lubbly-jubbly," the driver replied, giving Emma a wink. "West India Docks it is. Hold tight Guv, and I'll have you and your missus there in a jiffy."

The driver slammed the door before Emma could retort that she was most certainly not Barnaby's "missus". They heard him clamber up into his seat, and then the carriage took off at such a break-neck speed that Emma was certain its wheels must be smoking.

"The West India Docks?" she asked, turning to Barnaby with a raised eyebrow.

"You don't think I'm intending to stay in England?" the villain replied with a giddy laugh. "I'm off to Paris, my dear, where Liscarroll's items will fetch a pretty penny."

"And what about me?" she asked, hoping to gauge exactly what his plan for her was. "Will you take me to France?"

"We'll see," Barnaby said dismissively, glancing nervously out the window as the streets of London flashed by.

Emma tried to engage him in conversation again, but Barnaby's nerves were obviously frayed, for he waved the pistol at her and forbid her to speak.

Goodness, she thought, her own nerves now beginning to give, however shall I get back from France? She could not speak the language and if Barnaby dumped her at some roadside, how would she be able to ask for help?

The carriage drew to a halt at the docks, a part of London that Emma had never visited. No proper lady would deign to set foot in the place, and for good reason.

The docks were crammed to bursting with crowds of people. Lighters, sailors, hardy looking dockers, and lightskirts all paraded along the cobblestones. Emma had hoped that once she and Barnaby were amongst the crowd, that she might slip away unnoticed, but the awful man kept one hand locked around her arm as he dragged her along towards the pier.

"This is her," he grunted, coming to a halt at the gangplank to a tall schooner.

Barnaby looked around and spotted one of the ship's sailors, who was busy directing his dockers as to what cargo to load.

"I have a passage booked," Barnaby said, adopting a clipped, upper class accent. "I shall need you to find someone who can direct me to my berth."

"Gis a minute," the sailor replied, spitting a large glob of chewing tobacco onto the cobblestones near Emma's feet. She visibly recoiled, which caused the sailor to give a hoot of laughter.

"Ain't no room for dolly-birds in any of our berths, mister," he

continued, leering at Emma in a way that made her want to retch. "If you want to 'ave your way with her, take her into one of the nearby taverns. You've time enough before the ship sets sail."

Emma expected Barnaby to bluster that of course she must be allowed on board, but instead, the awful man seemed to be giving the sailor's suggestion some consideration.

"Seven Stars, over yonder usually 'as a room or two free," the sailor continued.

"Of course, my thanks, good sir," Barnaby replied, and to Emma's astonishment he began to drag her over toward the tavern.

"You can't possibly think you're having your way with me," she hissed in disgust.

"Oh, Lud no. You're not my type," Barnaby replied with a snarl, "I *was* planning on throwing you overboard, halfway across the Channel, but I'll have to make do with leaving your body in some tawdry room on the docks. Won't that make for quite the scandal, my Lady?"

Emma, who had always thought herself quite resilient, felt her knees go weak at his words. He meant to kill her? She knew that she should scream and shout to draw attention, but it was taking the utmost concentration not to faint away dead on the spot.

Think, she whispered to herself, think.

"Emma!"

A voice she would have known anywhere reached her ears, carried across the noise of the crowds by its anger.

"Emma!" it called again, and Emma dragged herself out of her daze and looked into the distance. What she saw was the most wonderful sight she could imagine.

Georgette, Dowager Duchess of Liscarroll, was tearing along the cobbled docks, brandishing a parasol and wearing an expression so furious, that it would leave even the bravest of men quaking in their boots.

"Georgette!" she cried in return, her hope that she would live growing stronger as she spotted the two liveried footmen racing along behind the Dowager Duchess. "Over here. Help! Don't let him get away."

Her shouts had caused Barnaby to drop her arm in fright. The dastardly villain took one look at the furious Duchess descending upon him, and took flight.

"Somebody catch him," Georgette shouted to the disinterested crowd.

Sensing that her audience might need a little motivation, Georgette shouted again; "I will give the man who catches him one hundred pounds!"

Well, Emma thought, if ever a sentence could get the day-

labourers who loitered by the docks moving, it was that. She watched, a little startled, as the crowd surged as one after the pot-bellied Barnaby. It soon became apparent that the man was in no fit state to out-run the hardy, manual workers, who soon had him pinned down underneath them.

"Gracious, my dear," Georgette came to a halt beside Emma, a little breathless but immaculately presented as ever. "Are you alright?"

"Fine," Emma replied with a smile, "Thanks to you. How did you know he'd taken me?"

"Well," Georgette looked a trifle embarrassed. "I hadn't actually gone home to check on my cats. I wanted to give you and Peter a chance to speak alone. So, my driver pulled in on the opposite side of the square and I took a little nap. Imagine my surprise when one of the footmen spotted that awful man dragging you into a carriage. We instantly took chase and here we are!"

"Oh, thank you Georgette," Emma flung her arms around the Dowager Duchess' neck in gratitude. "What would I have done without you?"

"I'm sure that you would have worked something out," Georgette replied, her voice catching a little with emotion. "I cannot bear to think of another outcome. Come, my dear, let us get back to Liscarroll House. I'm sure my son is worried sick."

Georgette placed an arm around Emma's shoulder and guided her toward her waiting carriage. Once Emma was safely inside, Georgette called her footmen over to give them instruction.

"Fetch a constable, Fawkes. Harley, get the names of the men who apprehended that awful man—I owe them one hundred pounds."

Once the two footmen were dispatched, Georgette instructed the driver to head for St James' Square. The two women sat in companionable silence, as the carriage wove its way through the crowded city streets. The realisation of what had just happened slowly began to sink in and, to Emma's shame, she felt hot tears upon her cheeks.

"Oh, don't mind me," she said, as Georgette took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "I'm just being silly, I'm quite alright really."

"You're not being silly," Georgette replied with a sob. "When I imagine what that awful man might have done..."

To Emma's surprise, the usually cool and composed Dowager Duchess of Liscarroll broke down into great, heaving sobs, and Emma found their roles reversed as she comforted Georgette. It was, she realised, one of the most touching moments of her life. Here was a woman, who had no blood connection or obligation to her, sobbing with sorrow at the thought of any harm coming to her. Perhaps this was what it was like to have a mother, she thought.

"I always wanted a daughter," Georgette said with a sniff, once she had calmed down a little.

"Soon, you will have a daughter-in-law," Emma replied with a smile.

"Really?" Georgette looked at her hopefully.

"Yes, but don't tell him just yet," she replied with a giggle, "I want to keep him guessing for just a little bit longer."

And so, giggling and whispering together, the Dowager Duchess and Emma continued on their way to St. James' Square.

"Summon every officer you have in London to look for her! Harper, fetch my pistol and saddle up a fresh horse."

As Emma entered Liscarroll House, she was greeted by the sight of the Duke issuing orders and striding about importantly. If it wasn't for the look of anguish on his face, she would rather have enjoyed seeing one of England's most powerful men setting out to rescue her.

"I don't think a fresh horse will be necessary, Harper," Emma called quietly to the young footman, who seemed to be thoroughly enjoying all the excitement.

"Emma?"

The Duke turned on the heel of his polished Hessian at the sound of her voice, his face a picture of hope.

"Oh, thank God."

Without any mind to the dozens of servants in their presence, Liscarroll strode forward and pulled Emma into a bone-crushing embrace.

"That's quite enough of that, Peter," Georgette called from behind them. "It would be terrible if you were to smother the poor girl mere minutes after she had escaped death."

Liscarroll released Emma from his arms, though he took her hand in his, as though reluctant to be without her touch. His hand was far larger than hers and his strong grip was a comfort to Emma, who felt weak with exhaustion.

"What happened?" the Duke turned to his mother, his voice impatient for answers.

"That dastardly librarian is what happened," Georgette replied with a sniff.

The Dowager Duchess proceeded to tell her version of the tale and when she finished, Emma explained what had happened upon her return to Liscarroll House.

"So, you see," she concluded, "The man was not actually Mr Humphreys, but some chap called Barnaby."

"Theodore Barnaby, to be precise," a voice called from the open

front door.

"Mr Bleakly," Liscarroll called, before whispering as an aside to Emma, "The Magistrate from Bow Street."

Mr Bleakly made his way into the entrance hall, which though large, was rapidly becoming overcrowded.

"Why don't we take this into the drawing room?" Georgette suggested, "I don't know about anyone else, but I could do with a cup of tea."

And so, a few minutes later, Emma, Peter, Georgette and Lord Amberford were all clutching warm cups of tea as they listened to Mr Bleakly explain just who Theodore Barnaby was.

"He had acted as a manservant to Mr Humphreys for nearly twenty years," the Magistrate explained, "A few weeks ago, he interceded a letter from His Grace to Mr Humphreys requesting he view his rather extensive collection of works. Barnaby instantly spotted an opportunity to make a very pretty penny, which would allow him to retire in luxury."

"How audacious," Georgette gasped, "He pretended to be someone he was not, just like that girl who stole from the Countess of Warwickshire."

"Indeed," Mr Bleakly nodded. "On the night of the ball, he was pilfering loot from the library when His Grace rudely interrupted him."

"I knew I had felt as though someone else was in the room before the door closed," Liscarroll said, clicking his fingers as the pieces of the puzzle slotted together. "So, he opened and closed the door to make me think that someone had followed me in?"

"Exactly," Mr Bleakly gave a smile. "Afterwards, when he realised that he had not been rumbled and that there were a whole host of characters vying for the position of would-be-murderer, he set his sights a little higher."

"The Papyrus of Ani," Liscarroll breathed, shooting Emma an excited look. "Do you remember, it was he who suggested we gather all the suspects together in Sussex?

"How clever," Emma whispered in reply, for despite his awful deeds, this Mr Barnaby had executed an almost perfect plan.

"Once in Sussex, he devised a plot to poison His Grace, once he had shown Barnaby where the treasures were stored," Mr Bleakly continued. "He had already intended to frame the French girl, given that people would be far less inclined to believe a servant over the other higher ranking suspects. His intentions were to disappear quite quickly after the act, but he became greedy and returned to Liscarroll House to steal even more of His Grace's collection."

"The fiend," Lord Amberford breathed, "I assume it was he who

sent me the letter saying my mother was ill. He must have known that I would have recognised he was an impostor."

The group was silent as they each digested Mr Barnaby's wicked plans and the silence was only broken when Mr Bleakly gave a discreet cough and announced that he must leave.

"Need to tie up a few loose ends," he said cheerfully as he left.

"I think I'll ride down to Oxford and check on Mr Humphreys," Lord Amberford decided, bowing to the ladies and then making his departure.

"I simply *must* check on my cats," Georgette added innocently, flashing Emma and Liscarroll a smile, before dashing from the room.

"I didn't think she had any cats," the Duke said with a smile as the door closed behind his mother.

They were alone. Finally, they had been granted the space to talk freely.

"I—" Emma began, but the Duke got there first.

"I love you, Emma," he said, "Most ardently. I did not realise just how much, until this afternoon when I thought I might have lost you. Oh, will you forgive me for being a suspicious fool?"

"I love you too," she replied, any shyness she might have felt washed away in the instant that she saw his joyous smile. "Even if you were a tad silly for believing that awful Lady Thornton."

"I shall never believe anyone except you, ever again, as long as we both shall live," Liscarroll vowed.

"That's even sillier," Emma replied with a laugh, "Though I do like the idea of us being together as long as we both shall live."

"You do?"

"I do," she replied, but the words had no sooner left her lips than Liscarroll had swept her up into his arms in a kiss that allowed for no further conversation.

A girl could get used to being kissed like this, she thought as she melted into his arms.

#

Epilogue

Peter William Brazil, Sixth Duke of Liscarroll, was a man who liked to think that he could anticipate the outcome of most situations. The particular situation that he currently found himself in, however, had an outcome that he could only guess at.

"Lud," he whispered to the corniced ceiling, as he exhaled a

plume of cheroot smoke. "Does it always take this long?"

Of course, the ceiling could not reply, and the Duke was left to pace the floor of his library wondering when it would all be done.

There was a knock upon the door and Peter turned to find Harper, the young footman, standing in the doorway, his eyes streaming as they came into contact with the clouds of smoke which billowed out of the room. By Peter's estimate, he had smoked at least two dozen cigars since his wife had gone into labour yesterday morning.

"Is she?"

Peter was never one to let anyone, never mind a servant, see him vulnerable, but for one second every awful outcome that might happen flashed across his mind.

"Her Grace is well," the footman said gently, "They are waiting for you upstairs."

They.

Peter took the runners two at a time in his haste to see just exactly who this *they* person was. Was it a boy or a girl? For months he had been guessing, ascribing old wives' tales to each one of Emma's symptoms in his wish to know just who it was that was growing inside his wife.

"They're inside," Georgette said to her son, as she exited the Duchess' chambers, dabbing tears of joy from her cheeks.

"And they're?"

"Perfectly healthy—both of them. Why don't you go in and see for yourself?"

Peter pushed open the heavy, mahogany door and was greeted by the sight of his wife, propped up against a dozen pillows in her bed.

"Emma," he said, his heart bursting with love for the woman before him, whose face was radiant with joy.

"Are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine," she said, waving a dismissive hand against his obvious anxiety, "We're all fine. Why don't you take a look?"

Peter turned as a laying in woman exited the dressing room with a babe swaddled in her arms.

"Your Grace, you have a son," she said, with a wide smile upon her face.

"And a daughter," a second midwife added as she followed the first into the room.

"It's twins!" Emma called with a laugh from the bed as Peter turned to look at her in shock.

"Shall I fetch my smelling salts?" Georgette called mischievously as she re-entered the room.

"I think you'd best mother," Peter said, as he sat down on the edge of the bed in shock.

He had always thought he could anticipate the outcome of most situations, but he had never imagined that he would start the day loving one person with all his heart, and then end it by loving three.

#

An Extract from The Duke's Fiancée in Disguise

Below is an extract from my next book, The Duke's Fiancée in Disguise:

When Ava Smith comes face to face with a girl who looks exactly like her, she is certain she has seen a ghost! But, Lady Emily Garland, is no ghost, and is certain that she and Ava must be long lost twins. Despite her better judgement, Ava allows Emily to convince her to swap lives for a month, in order for Ava to scupper Emily's engagement to a cold, hardhearted man.

Imagine Ava's surprise when Emily's betrothed turns out to be her unrequited crush, the Duke of Kilbride!

Ross Alexander Hamilton, the Sixth Duke of Kilbride, knows that he must do his duty to the line by marrying and procuring an heir. Love was never in the equation in his search for a bride. All that he required was a lady who was well-bred, quiet and biddable—and he thought that he had found just what he was looking for in Lady Emily Garland.

Imagine his surprise, when overnight, his betrothed goes from meek and compliant to outspoken and increadibly alluring.

As Ross battles to keep his fiancee his, Ava battles against her own feelings for the Duke, as she navigates the sumptuous world of Regency London.

Sign up to my newsletter for updates on when The Duke's Fiancée in Disguise will be released!

http://eepurl.com/cEueVD

London, 1796

Alastair Garland, Sixth Marquess of Havisham, was not afraid to admit that he loved his wife--even if it was most unfashionable to do

so. What he was afraid to admit to—out loud at least—was that he loved her more than his four sons.

Oh, don't think that he did not adore the four strapping lads whom his wife, Adeline, had gifted him during the first decade of their marriage, for he did. It was just that when it came to their happiness, or the happiness of anyone else for that matter, Alastair could wholly admit that they was secondary concern as compared to his wife.

Which was why, despite the recommendation of several physicians not to, Alastair agreed that he and Adeline would try for a fifth child—a girl. All that Adeline wanted in the world was a daughter, and who was Alastair to deny her such a thing?

After months of trying, which the Marquess thoroughly enjoyed, the Marchioness of Havisham conceived, and thus began the un-enjoyable portion of their mission. For nine months Lord Havisham walked on eggshells; anytime his wife sneezed, coughed, or passed wind—not that he would admit that this was an act she was capable of—the Marquess would suffer a fit of the vapours. For months, Adeline made sure to carry a bottle of smelling salts on her person, lest her husband fainted dead away.

At last, the day of the labour dawned and the Marchioness was whisked away to her bedchamber, to be attended to by three of London's most eminent physicians, two laying in women, and an accoucheur for good luck. As the day wore into night, and back to day again, the Marquess was struck by a realisation; he had been so consumed by his wife's happiness, that he had not even thought of his own. What would he do if Adeline, as two doctors had warned might happen, died during childbirth? The thought was too much to even contemplate, though as Adeline's labour pains continued into a third day, it was all that Alastair could think of.

Finally, after three bottles of brandy, several dozen cigars, and some work on Adeline's part, a babe was born. Alastair, who was never a man to do anything in a hurry, took the runners two at a time as he made his way upstairs to see his wife. His knock on her bedchamber door was answered by Dr Philips, who gave the Marquess a rather strained look.

"Your wife is asleep," he whispered, as he slipped outside the door, "Her body is exhausted and she is very, very weak. I fear for her, my Lord, but if we pray and remain calm, God willing she might survive."

"And the babe?"

Again Dr Philips looked most uncomfortable as he replied, "Is with the laying in woman, in the room yonder. She gave a few cries when she was born, which seemed to bolster your wife's spirits, but she too is very weak."

A girl. Thank goodness, after all that, it was a girl.

Alastair made his way into the room opposite his wife's chambers, where a small nursery had been prepared for the new baby and her wet-nurse. The room was dim, lit only by one candle, and silent as the grave.

"Hullo," Alastair whispered to the laying-in woman, who sat in the rocker in the corner clutching a bundle of blankets. "I've come to see my daughter."

"Oh, my Lord," the laying-in woman, who had been on her feet for the best part of three days, leapt back onto them at the sight of the Marquess. "Forgive me, I wanted to hold the poor mite as she—as she —"

As she slipped from the world.

Alastair did not need the woman to finish the sentence, for he knew in his heart—and from the room's silence-- that his poor, dainty daughter had not lived.

All that work and Adeline's health had been sacrificed for nothing.

"Dr Philips bade me come in here," the woman continued, gibbering a little with nerves for she had never spoken to a Marquess. "He was afraid it would kill her Ladyship, if she were to know that the poor, wee bairn was gone."

"Kill her?"

Alastair broke out into a clammy sweat at the thought that there was still a risk Adeline might expire, despite having survived the worst.

"Aye," the laying-in woman nodded fervently, her soft Scottish brogue not doing anything to take the sharpness from her words. "Her Ladyship is very weak, t'would snuff her out like a candle if she heard."

Gracious; Alastair had not thought of that. The melancholia he felt at his daughter's demise, was replaced by an urgent need to do something—anything—to ensure his wife's continued health.

An idea came to him, so preposterous that initially he dismissed it. But then, the Marquess caught sight of the unmoving, bundle of swaddled blankets in the laying-in woman's arms, and took such a fit of despair at the sight of them, that he knew he could not present this poor, sad sight to his wife.

"I will need you to fetch me another baby," he said, in as even a manner as he could muster.

"Beg pardon, my Lord?" the woman questioned, thinking that perhaps she had not understood him.

"I said," Alastair repeated, "That I will need you to fetch me another baby. I cannot tell my wife that her daughter did not live—as

you said, the news will surely kill her."

"But, where am I supposed to fetch a baby from?" the laying in woman asked in confusion; the good people of Grosvenor Square were not likely to have any spare offspring lying about.

"The Foundling Hospital will be happy to give you one, for a bag of coin," Lord Garland replied evenly, "And there will be a bag of coin in it for you, of course."

The promise of money did not seem to sway the Scottish woman's doubts, for her face was still creased into a frown of worry. "And what about this poor lass?" she asked, looking down at the blankets in her arms.

"The hospital will, no doubt, have arrangements made for burying her," the Marquess replied gently, sensing that this matter would take some great tact and diplomacy on his part. "And they will be happy to know that a poor, orphaned babe, with no future to speak of will go to a home where it will know only love and prosperity."

For a moment, Lord Garland feared that he may have overdone it, but then the midwife wiped a tear from her rheumy eyes and nodded.

"Aye," she said with a plaintive sigh, "It's God's work, if something good is borne from this tragedy—how much coin did you say, my Lord?"

"A bag," the Marquess replied with relief, "Come, follow me down the backstairs to the library and I will see you are provided for."

And so, the Marquess and the midwife, disappeared downstairs to the library, where Lord Garland furnished Mrs McCafferty with two bags, heavy with coin, and strict instructions to fetch him a girl, no more than a day old, without any mention of his name.

Mrs McCafferty was not a hard-hearted woman, but throughout her career she had attended to thousands of women in labour. She knew that, unfortunately, a lot of babies did not live long after taking their first breath in this hard world. She also knew that London was brimming over with orphans, and that to be given the chance to save a child from a future as an illiterate street-urchin was no less than a miracle.

And so, she set forth into the cold, drizzly London night, determined to save a poor, unwanted girl from the cruel life of a Blackguard child.

The Foundling Hospital, the bastion of charitable goodness that the Marquess of Havisham had directed Mrs McCafferty toward, would not do for tonight's purposes. Run by good Protestants, who were meticulous in their record-keeping, Mrs McCafferty knew that she would not be able to secret a baby from their clutches without first signing at least a dozen papers and revealing who her patron was.

Instead, relying on gossip and rumours, she made her way toward Lambeth, to the Asylum for Orphaned Girls.

"Who's there?"

The door to the forbidding building was opened, after much banging on Mrs McCafferty's part, by a woman whose face was as hard and cracked as her voice. She held a candle in her hand as she peered out the half-open door into the night at the midwife.

"My master," Mrs McCafferty adopted the dignified tones of a high-ranking servant as she spoke, "Requires a newborn girl."

"Is that so?" the woman replied with disinterest, "If a newborn is what your master wants, then he may come along in the morning and fetch her himself."

The woman made to close the door upon Mrs McCafferty, but the wily Scotswoman stopped her with her booted foot.

"My master is willing to pay," she continued, allowing the bag of coin in her hand to clunk tantalisingly against the door. The merry jingle of money had a Benedictine effect upon the Asylum's matron, for she opened the door wide in welcome, and bade Mrs McCafferty follow her inside.

"I need a newborn, or as near to newborn as you can give me," the midwife whispered, as she followed the Matron—Mrs Hannigan—down a long, echoing corridor.

"Give me a minute to think," Mrs Hannigan, who had consumed the best part of a bottle of gin before Mrs McCafferty's arrival, replied. Though her mind was quite addled with the drink, it had already fixed on what baby would do for her unexpected customer. The only problem was, that she did not quite trust the Scottish woman to go along with her plan.

"Stay here," she commanded, as she took the bundle of blankets from Mrs McCafferty's arms.

Mrs Hannigan disappeared into one of the asylum's smaller dormitories, which was lined with cribs holding sleeping babies.

Her newest arrivals were located at the end of the dormitory, just under the window. The light of the moon illuminated the two cribs she sought, and she noted with a grunt that some softhearted dolt had moved them closer together.

Twins; borne by an upper-class lady just that afternoon. Though the silly girl had seen fit to bleed to death afterwards, which was rather a shame, for Mrs Hannigan had hoped to extract a lot of coin from her.

It was easy to see, even in the soft moonlight, that the two babes in the cribs were as identical as identical could be. For a minute, Mrs Hannigan wondered as to the wisdom of her decision, but the memory of the money coupled with the howling winter wind outside the

window, pushed all her doubts aside.

It was not like their paths would ever cross, she reasoned, as she swapped one baby out of the crib and replaced it with the poor, bundled babe in her arms.

It was rather like playing God, Mrs Hannigan thought with a hiccough, as she returned to the waiting midwife with the slumbering baby girl. One twin would live a life of prosperity, whilst the other twin would grow up to be nothing more than a maid—if she was lucky, and neither girl would ever know she had a sister who looked just like her...